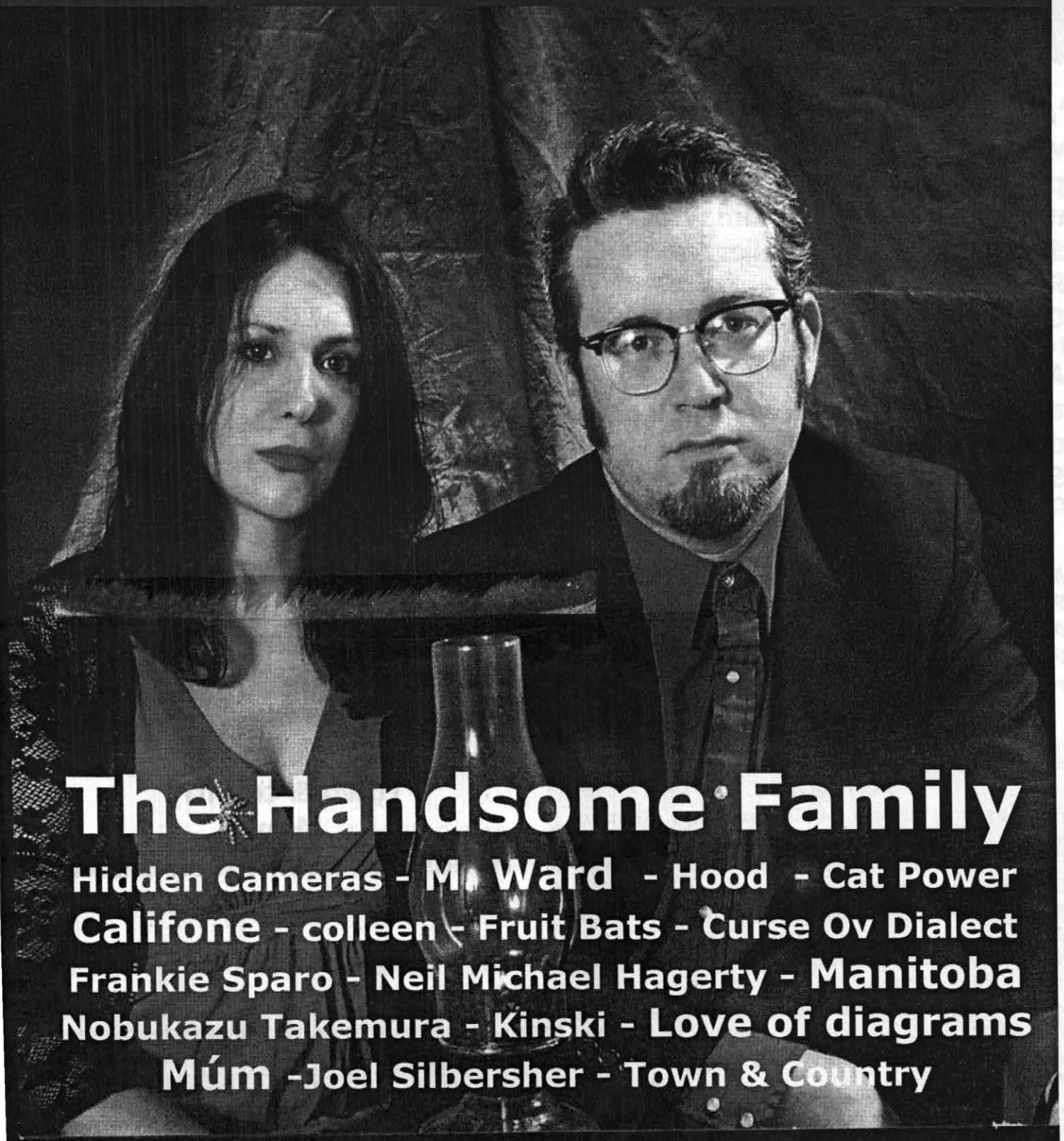
SADNESS IS IN THE SKY

ISSUE NUMERO 21



The Handsome Family

Hidden Cameras - M. Ward - Hood - Cat Power
Califone - colleen - Fruit Bats - Curse Ov Dialect
Frankie Sparo - Neil Michael Hagerty - Manitoba
Nobukazu Takemura - Kinski - Love of diagrams
Múm -Joel Silbersher - Town & Country

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'A small universe of song' was compiled, sequenced and produced by Steve Phillips, and mastered by Justin Skim with Steve Phillips @ Cavalier Studios, Research, Australia, October 2003.
(www.cavaliermusic.com)

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IL CONTENTO DI QUESTO ISSUE:

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Con grazie:
Francesca(as always, vital), Zan Rowe, Richard Moffat, Bec, Jessica and Thrill Jockey, Drag City, JC and Secretly Canadian, Chloe and Inertia, Aaron and Alyson at Spunk!, Steve, Justin, Angela and Steve at Remote Control, Anthony Williams, Mark(Tubbs) Rayner, Dora and Mary, Mario Vitellone, Trifekta, Stef and Architecture label, Bruce at Kranky, Ben Ralph, Ian and Don at Constellation, Caroline Tran(JJJ), Sub Pop, Joel Silbersher, Juk, Chan Marshall, Tim Picone, Luke and Antonia, Sophie Best, Dave Lang, all retailers, Martin at Shock Exports, Joel Gibb, Dave Chatfield, Mel Lake, Tony Morley, Cecile Schott, Sub Pop, and to those who I haven't thanked, you'll be in my mind in a moment no doubt!
If this is the door on 21 issues, thanks to my family and friends, and those in the musical arena who've been monumental in keeping my desire afloat.

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Hidden Cameras:

see
hear
smell
touch
flash!!

Sometimes a record very unexpectantly leaves an impression on you that you can't quite explain. 2003 has been the source of this rather strange phenomenon for me on a few priceless occasions. One such case is that of Canada's The Hidden Cameras. Headed up by one Joel Gibb, Hidden Cameras seemed like just another in a long line of signings to the Rough Trade record label. Their debut, the wonderful 'The smell of our own' is a luscious combination of Gibb's clever lyrical notations of gay live and gay love, lyrics which often translate to any sexual preference despite his clear delight in the male 'form'. Harmonies and orchestration culminate into rich, almost syrupy arrangements, which, despite that horrendous description, are inexplicable sweet and utterly majestic.

As a debut, 'The smell of our own' defies it's own circumstance.

Steve: 'Joel, this album is golden, from your brilliant melodies to the production and the orchestration, to the beautifully naked lyrics, is this your masterwork?'

Joel: 'Not at all. I think it is a good start to something though. I learned a lot from making it, and about what I want records to sound like.'

Steve: 'It sounds ridiculous for me to say this but I think 'The smell of our own' is the most glorious gay pop record of all time. Do you think that there is a still a broad homophobia in music across the board?'

Joel: 'I don't know if I would call it 'homophobia' but there is such an asexuality to a lot of indie music which is disconcerting at times. Other genres of music like hip-hop is very homophobic, it depends what music circles you are in I guess.'

Steve: 'Well, like some of the best songwriters throughout the ages, you've tied in private emotions with political opinion and perspective. As a result this is an album which is very much of its time. Do you think this album could just be an important time capsule for us all?'

Joel: 'Maybe, that's for you to decide.'

Steve: 'The record sounds so large, can you describe the process of writing it and then recording it?'

Joel: 'Some of the songs are very old. 'Breathe on it' and 'Boys of melody' are five years old, others were quite new. I knew I wanted to have everything on a record; choir, harp, strings, pipe organ, the works. It started as an idea and it was only after that I was able to see what worked and what didn't work.'

Steve: 'The songs themselves in their earliest incarnation, were they written on the guitar or piano? What is your usual means of writing music?'

Joel: 'Neither, they were written in my head and then I went to a guitar later to work them out on an instrument.'

Steve: 'Shame' is a really strong lyrical song, can you tell me what provoked its birth?'

Joel: 'Playing with words really. It wasn't a conscious narrative like it may appear in its finished form.'

Steve: 'And 'The man that I am with my man', a love song and nothing less, you must be proud of it, yes?'

Joel: 'Sometimes.'

Steve: 'Now the talk goes that The Hidden Cameras live shows are pretty amazing and involve a large musical ensemble along with dancers and others. What is the scope of The Hidden Cameras in full live mode?'

Joel: 'There is no such thing as full live mode because we are constantly doing different things.'

Steve: 'So specifically, who is in The Hidden Cameras right now and what role do they play in the band?'

Joel: 'Too many people to mention, everyone has a different role: Maggie is my old room-mate and she really gets the crowd going with dance moves to follow and she plays a mean tambourine and glockenspiel. Justin plays the organ, Matias does all sorts of things but mainly plays bass and drums. Owen plays violin, Luis sometimes dances, sometimes plays organ or a drum. When we toured Europe there were only 6 of us. We are going to do a collaborative work with the Toronto Dance Company. There will be thirty performers in total, and the dancers will engage with the musicians and vice versa. I also intend on doing a show with Daniel Barrow at some point who is an overhead projector animator. He actually made our new video for 'A miracle' and he would be able to do live storytelling with some overheads moving on a projector.'

Steve: 'Given the enormity of the album instrumentally and otherwise, how do you go about translating it in a live sense?'

Joel: 'There is no sense in doing that although there have been attempts at times when we play in a church we have the pipe organ going and I assemble a choir who end up dancing half the time, it's something totally different though. The record is all about production and a controlled environment, the live show is all about chaos in a pop structure.'

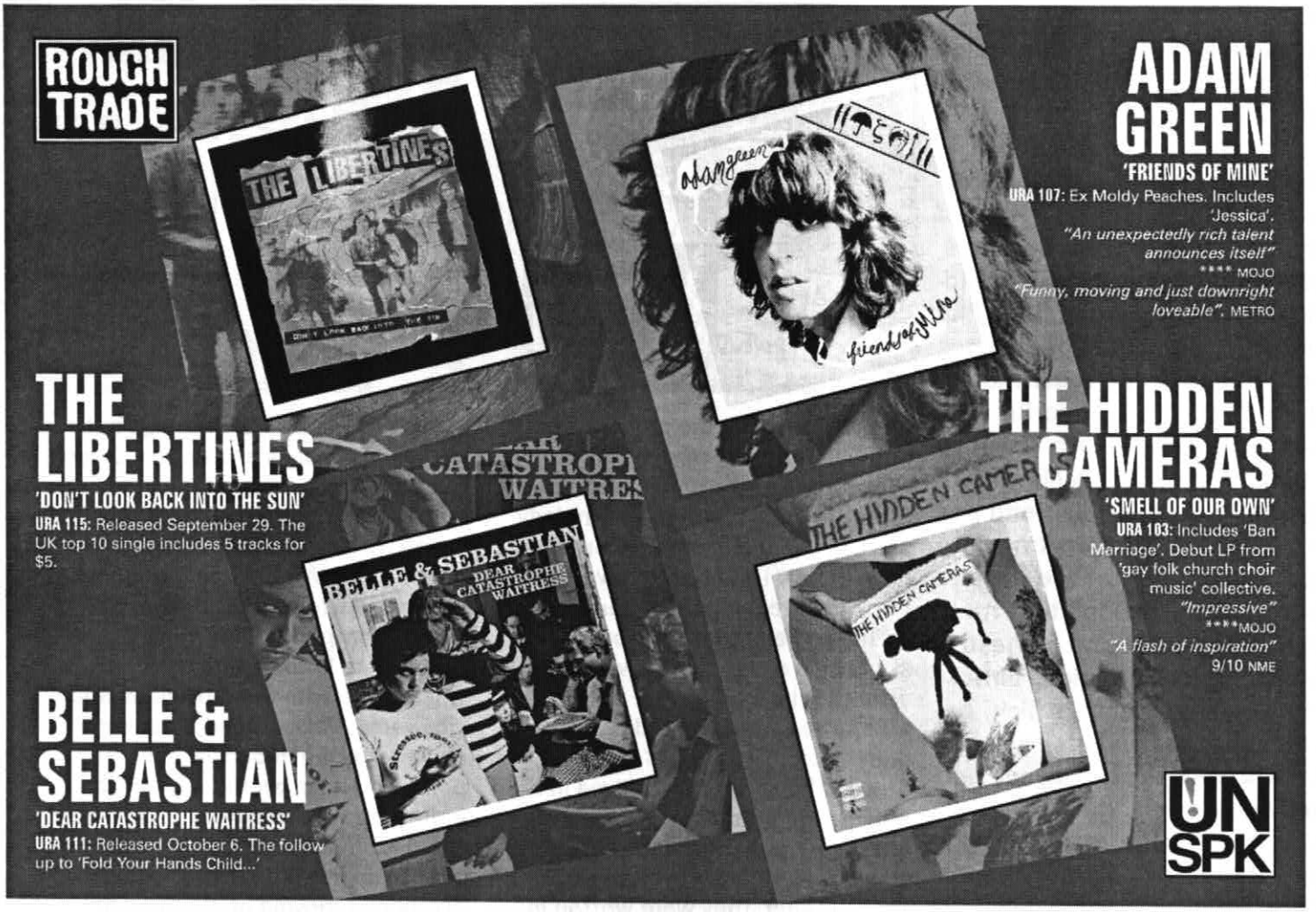
And this, even at this early juncture in the career of Joel Gibb's Hidden Cameras is just what they might amount to, some addition to the semblance of 'chaos in a pop structure'. I argue that 'The smell of our own' is one of *the* best debut albums in years, a real treasure trove of perfect pop constructions, enough to make Gibb one of our generations new songwriting heroes. Hence I wondered of Gibb, 'Who are *your* heroes?'

Joel: 'AA Bronson, GB Jones, Quentin Crisp.. and Joe Orton.'

Steve: 'And your villains?'

Joel: 'Dickhead doormen at clubs.'

The Hidden Cameras' 'The smell of our own' is out on Rough Trade.



ADAM GREEN

'FRIENDS OF MINE'

URA 107: Ex Moldy Peaches. Includes 'Jessica'.

"An unexpectedly rich talent announces itself" **** MOJO

"Funny, moving and just downright loveable", METRO

THE LIBERTINES

'DON'T LOOK BACK INTO THE SUN'

URA 115: Released September 29. The UK top 10 single includes 5 tracks for $5.

THE HIDDEN CAMERAS

'SMELL OF OUR OWN'

URA 103: Includes 'Ban Marriage'. Debut LP from 'gay folk church choir music' collective.

"Impressive" ****MOJO

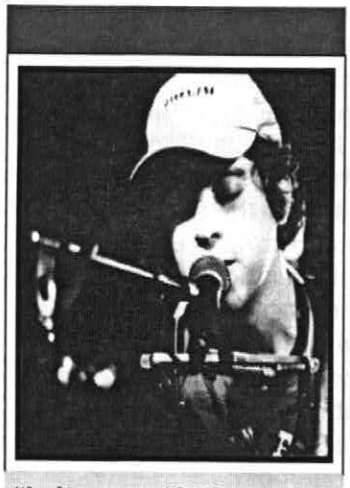
"A flash of inspiration" 9/10 NME

BELLE & SEBASTIAN

'DEAR CATASTROPHE WAITRESS'

URA 111: Released October 6. The follow up to 'Fold Your Hands Child...'

M. WARD



"Is it surreal? It's getting there.." M. Ward on music? M. Ward on film? M. Ward on politics? No to all of the above.. "I can't complain too much, I think everything's going pretty well."

Delusions from a yeast incompatibility? Again, no. M. (AKA Matt) Ward, in conversation with 3RRR-FM's Zan Rowe refers to his seemingly newfound profile and constant touring regime, a schedule with has been nonstop since the release of his exquisite third album 'Transfiguration of Vincent'.

The record follows Ward's 'End of Amnesia' release, a record caught on dark soul churning encounters and ghostly recollections, and laid on a bed of rickety acoustics and shadowy percussion and the odd dip into incomparable ambience.

Zan: "You sound like you're kind of an old man singing the blues of a hard life, but in reality you are only in your late twenties. Is this the case of challenging something a bit larger, connecting with something else within the song?"

Matt: "That's a good question. I'm not really sure where it comes from. People ask me 'do I know?' and I guess the only thing I could say is just listening to a lot of old records they sort of all blend in with each other after a while and you don't really know where things are coming from, but they come out in certain ways. It's hard for me to put my finger on anything precise about where it comes from. I guess it just sorta happened."

Zan: "You seem really at home with this sound, what's your musical heritage?"

Matt: "I started out in high school, that's when I started playing the guitar. I loved The Beatles and Sonic Youth. Those were my two favourite bands at that time and it sort of opened me up to the guitar. Ever since then it's been a matter of discovering other styles and it's usually through the guitar."

Zan: "All of your songs have this amazing sort of structure to them but they're all quite varied. You're traveling (musically) all over the place with your music, do you have any sort of 'favourites' or do you kind of just sort of push the envelope and try something with each turn?"

Matt: "I guess it has something to do too with why the voice kind of sounds like an old man sometimes. I'm really not exactly sure where it comes from, I'm not even sure where it's going, but it mainly comes around experimenting with older styles and trying things on for size knowing full well that you're not going to be able to achieve something as great as an old Jengo Reinhart record or something like that, but you know that you could atleast give it a shot on like half of a song or something. ..The reason that I got into music was to play the guitar more and learn about how to play it. Writing these different duets on 4-track is what I started out doing and I still have the whole World to learn. I guess it all does go back to recreating, continuing to be inspired by the initial stage of performing or 4-tracking. That's where you're main passion is so I do keep going back to that."

M. | WARD

"The main catalyst(for 'Transfiguration of Vincent') was this memorial service I went to for this guitarist who lived in Oregon named John Fahey. There was a memorial service in Salem, Oregon, which is really close to where I live in Portland, Oregon, and some of the music that was performed there I feel was really important for me to witness. It achieved something musically that I didn't know music could achieve, and it set certain ideals that I think crossed over for this record. Theme-wise I guess it asked of me a lot of questions, I guess I'm asking again on this record."

Zan: "Did you find it was kind of an unraveling where you started with one song and the record built around that?"

Matt: "Yeah, it's weird when you're a musician or you're playing music as your career or whatever, when you hear new music or when you hear songs or musical ideas that you've never heard before they can have more impact on your life, maybe more than people that work on computers for their living or something. It did have a strong impact because if something comes along and changes the way that you look at what you've been doing for years there's a lot of value in that."

And for all Ward's influences, his own work is going to no doubt prove influential in its own right; his rusty voice full of phrasings('The sky goes on forever in a symphony of song' -The undertaker) and antique glimpses of emotions we fear so much we'd like to turn our backs on them. But Ward's gift, like Calexico or Tom Waits, Mark Linkus and Richard Buckner is that he creates music so sad, so unhappy in itself that it shines.

Zan: "Do you prefer to be in the studio or do you like performing live a lot better?"

Matt: "It depends on the night. Usually I'm more comfortable in the studio, but it depends on the place, y'know? It depends on a million things as far as live performance goes."

Like most singer/songwriter types of his ilk, Matt Ward seems divided between the on-road duties of promoting and playing and actually seeming to make time to record. It's almost that their persona becomes more important than the music itself.

This is seemingly more often than not the result of journalism, rather then overwhelming demand; writers trying to create trends and maintain them, mostly out of their own laziness. Best thing is, usually the music speaks for itself in the end. Matt: "It's really hard for me to think or look at the trends as having any value in my life or what I'm doing. I think it's more of our(musicians) job to sort of blur those lines.

Sometimes I think it's the journalists jobs to make sure that they stay in tact so that they have something to write about."

In the music of M. Ward, we can safely say that there should always be something worth writing about. His genius(never take that word lightly) is calamity-like, his songs technically far from perfect but as important as any other ingredient he has, this aspect is essential, creating a blend somehow so pure and untouched yet so beautiful and even moving.

M. Ward's 'Transfiguration of Vincent' is out now via Merge/Matador.

Many thanks to Zan Rowe for her kindness (and for the interview too).

misplaced music

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HOOD:

Hats off as the Adams family brings some of their musical history into the present

One of the UK's finest bands, HOOD delivered a melancholic treasure - and one of the best albums of 2001 - with 'Cold House'. It's a recording that took the outfits unique combinations of guitars, dub-bass, live drums and electronic elements to new heights, particularly with its seamless fusion of the organic and electronic, and obvious disregard for generic boundaries (whether they be between UK indie-rock, IDM, dub or hip-hop).

For many in this part of the world, the album would have been their first exposure to the Leeds outfit's emotionally resonant sound. Yet, as 'Cold House' converts will now know, that release is part of a recorded history that includes four previous albums, many singles, and numerous tracks that have been issued on compilations over the years.

After touring the U.S. to support 'Cold House', "sheer frustration with everything" led Hood's Richard Adams to revisit the band's earliest recordings, and so began the project to compile out-of-print singles, rare compile tracks and previously unreleased material.

"The compilations were prompted by the unavailability of the old stuff," he explains, "and [by us] missing the feeling of churning out records with thousands of songs on them!" Richard found a refreshing spontaneity in those lo-fi, noise-pop, 'thousand-song' singles, and - while he couldn't imagine Hood, circa-2003, returning to that sound - wanted to share the enthusiasm and pride he felt for the band's back-catalogue. "I think some of the [old] stuff is much better than the kind of music we've been making recently," he states, before adding a qualifier. "Well, maybe not better, but more 'straight from the heart'. "It's all over the shop sonically," he adds, "but I think that makes it more interesting, and challenging." Those songs and sounds can be found on the recently released 'Singles Compiled' and 'Compilations 1995-2002', collections, which are stunning documents of the band's evolution; ideal for both completists and those seeking an easily-digestible introduction to Hood's pre-'Cold House' days.

The influence of New Zealand's Flying Nun and Expressway labels, "and early Pavement", is evident in the band's early recordings.. ("It was great to find that bands were just recording themselves and not relying on some pony-tailed engineer that doesn't give a shit about the music," notes Richard); while the highly-regarded single release of 1998, '(The) Weight', seems to redefine the interaction of the band's organic, indie-pop ethic and its interest in electronic textures.

"Sometimes I think that seven-inch sounds like one idea spread across a whole record," says Richard, of that single. "Though I have to admit it was a good idea. It was just [us] experimenting and learning, and throwing out the results of our experiments onto record to see what stuck. A lot of those old seven-inch's were snapshots of what we were up to in a particular year."

No matter what year, though, Hood has a remarkable ability to capture the often indescribable feelings of melancholy, longing and even loss in its music. They're the sort of emotions evoked by the photographic images often used in the band's artwork, and Richard sees it as a natural part of the band's approach to sound.

"We do want to create emotional music that affects people in a deeper way," he admits. "But I think this comes from just doing music on your terms, and because you have to do it, rather than doing it as some kind of money-making exercise."

The tracks collected on 'Compilations 1995-2002' certainly testify to the fact that Hood are refreshingly free of financial imperatives. The tunes a band gives away to various compilations might usually be regarded as cast-off's, but highlights such as "Sound The Cliché Klaxons", "I Have It In My Heart To Jump Into The Ocean", "Ley Lines" and "Cross The Land" certainly break that mold. How is it that these tracks haven't made it onto an official release before now?

"They just didn't seem right, I guess, at the time," offers Richard. "'Sound The Cliché Klaxons' is a good example, as we always liked the song but there was something not quite right about it. We couldn't get it finished how we wanted, so it ended up just being given away. I think it's good to give good stuff away [because] it rewards the person who has actively sought out the compilation for our track."

Thankfully, the karmic credit that might result from giving away so much 'good stuff' does seem to flow back to Hood on occasion. On 'Cold House' it was the guest performances of Dose One and Why? - from the avant-hip-hop collective Anticon - and touring with cLOUDDEAD on their subsequent U.S. tour; while, most recently, the band has been asked to appear at Spain's Avant Festival alongside Tortoise and Mogwai ("I'm very much looking forward to that," says an enthused Richard. "It's just come out of the blue, so god knows what's going on!").

Other than that performance, in esteemed and respected company, a three-piece Hood (Richard, his brother Chris and Stephen Royle - after Gareth S. Brown recently announced his planned departure) will spend the rest of 2003 working on the follow-up to 'Cold House'. "I'm afraid if I told you that I'd have to kill you," answers Richard, when asked how these recordings might compare to the previous album; although your humble scribe was prepared to risk life-and-limb for more details.

"The songs seem fairly tuneful," he elaborates, during a later phone interview. "I don't think it's going to be as electronic as 'Cold House', but I think it's going to be programmed and interestingly put together; with maybe not as many of those electronic beats. I worry about that kind of stuff dating a little bit, and it's very kind of 'now', or what people are doing [now]. So we want to use more natural sounds, but still, pull-and-push them in interesting directions using various [types of] sonic tomfoolery."

Richard notes that five songs are "in a reasonable state of being finished"; although "Chris records everything into his computer, and it's just kind of sprawled out across the computer in various forms; so it really hasn't come together in even a recognizable form yet". "When we started 'Cold House', it might surprise you to learn that it was incredibly bleak," he recalls. "The first few songs we recorded were very similar to "The Winter Hit Hard", and we thought, 'oh, this is going to be really, really miserable'; and then it lightened up as we recorded it."

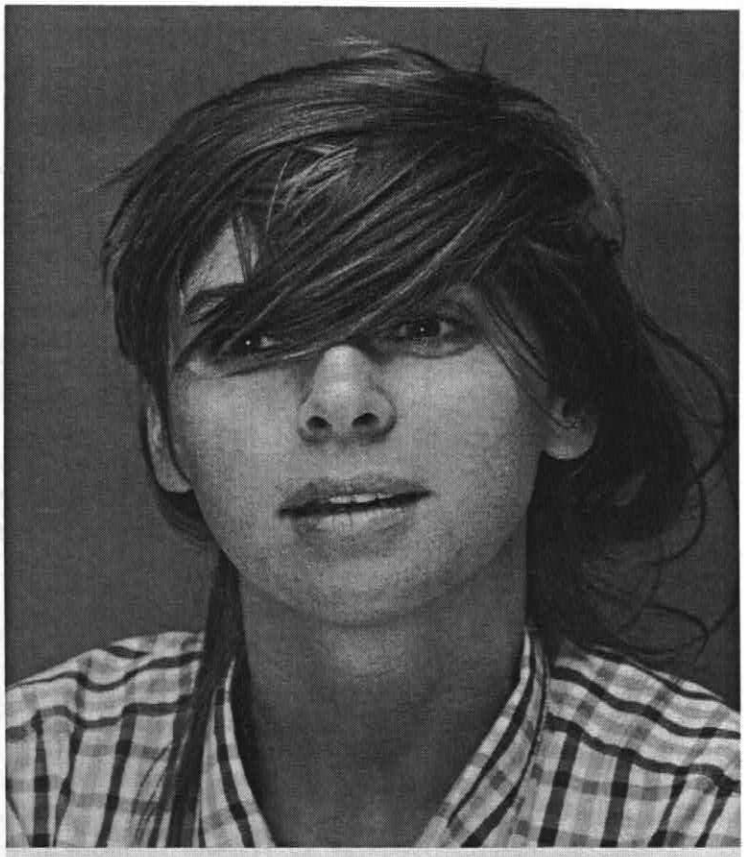
So having worked on the 'Singles Compiled' and 'Compilations 1995-2002' retrospectives - and having brought the band's history into sharp focus in the process - has there been any nostalgia for earlier sounds or ideas creeping into new songs?

Anthony Williams

"A bit, but we always try to move forward," concludes Richard. "I guess it's there in the back of your mind - we could have done more like this or that; but every time we start a new record it seems like a different band. In fact, I can't really remember how we did the others; it just kind of happens."

'Cold house', 'Singles compiled' and 'Compilations 1995-2002' are available through Sensory Projects.
For a Hood update you can check out: www.hoodmusic.net

****Many thanks to Anthony Williams whose fine new fanzine *'First past the post'* is available through all good record stores.****



CAT POWER:

,,,,snuggles up with us,, once more

Some of us will spend our lifetime searching. We're seeking out soulmates, we're looking for role models, heroes, and teachers. We *need* motivators and listeners. We will search forever for reassurance. Suffice to say when a person comes along whose spirit embodies these expectations in us, we just might find some solitude.
Arguably, at least on a musical level, one of those people is American songstress (and beauty) Chan Marshall.

Chan's songwriting under the Cat Power moniker has quite unlike any of her modern-day contemporaries and peers, save Jeff Buckley, P J Harvey and possibly Nick Cave, alarmed and assured us with such a distinct impact.

Chan's songs; per standard they're simplistic in composition yet always striking in their aesthetic beauty and emotional insight. They seem to define every juxtaposition: being loved but wanting LOVE, reflection in the arms of defiance, the pain of loving, and so on. In September this year Chan toured Australia for the fourth time. It was her first tour with a band tow, and there were varied reports of her performances from 'wonderful' to 'woeful', everyone it seemed had a different perspective.

Her 'You are free' album (a record which has been ritualistically praised and has taken her image to an unprecedented level) had provoked sold-out signs nationally prior to her even setting foot in the country, which in itself is a suggestion of her importance amongst music lovers. I spoke to Chan before she touched down and began by asking her if she had noticed any change in the reception she receives nowadays to her rather wonderful music.
Chan: 'No. Not at all.' Steve: 'Is that a comfort to you?'
Chan: 'It doesn't matter, it's fine. I don't care, y'know? If they like it they like it, if they don't they don't. You know what I mean? It's not the most important thing in the World..' Steve: 'Do the records and the songs that you're writing *deftly* reflect where you're at personally?'
Chan: 'Maybe, yeah. A moment sometimes where my head might be that day.... That song, that moment in time, that song then that day, but y'know it's always growing. It's always moving forward so I can't say that this record is really *right beside me*. Time's gone by since the release(of 'You are free') and also playing live the songs sort of transform and progress and change and shift.'
At this point in the interview it was clear that Chan wasn't feeling so hot about getting into things too deeply. 'I haven't done interviews in a long time so I'm not in the best mood!' Aside from her mood Chan also tells me that she's been sick of late with a lung infection, something she laughs could be the result of 'touring non-stop for probably six years.' 'No wonder that you've got a lung infection!'
Chan: 'Exactly! All the airplanes.. and hotel rooms.'

I've often theorized what a pain in the ass it must be for songwriters to constantly be getting grilled and quizzed over their work. Having spoken to Chan a few times, she, in her defense, has never baulked at a question regardless of its content, and somehow with Chan, regardless of the mood, you eventually get into something heavy.
Steve: 'Do you think after all of that rock'n'roll you're dramatically changed as a person?
Chan: 'No. Rock'n'roll no. As we get older I think just life in general.. Not having to do with making music at all. Life in general kinda forces people to grow.'
Cat Power is about all about growth. It's the subtext to each of her gorgeous songs, songs riddled with questions and their tentative answers. The songs are about wondering who you are and confronting who you are. Chan Marshall has always seemed happier to let feelings translate through her songs, maybe in an effort not to have to talk through and somehow trivialize her own emotions. 'You are free' is great like that, and that's what no doubt has made it so alluring to so many of us. Stylistically the record appears easily broken into two rather distinct halves; the first seven tracks recalling greatly her incredible 'Moonpix' album; a collection of songs she recorded with friends back in 1998 in Melbourne. The latter half takes on the aesthetic of 'The Covers Record'; a selection of stripped down covers she played the last time she was in Australia back in 2000.
Infamously unpredictable live I wondered if Chan is still into the idea of actually playing her music to a live audience.
Chan: 'Oh always! Nowadays I am. The older I get the less I give a shit about it. I've heard that to be true. When I was younger I heard that that was true and I think it is. The older you get the less you start caring as much.'
Steve: 'I would have thought that it could work the opposite way. As you get older you get more concerned with whether you can still cut it.' Chan: 'Hell no! It never fucking mattered in the first place. That should never matter.'
Cat Power's 'You are free' is available thru Matador/Remote Control. Chan will be returning to Australia early in 2004.

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Sentiment is part of our make-up. That which oozes a familiar essence can prove to be long-lasting and music which maintains a sentimental end can turn out to be some of the most memorable we encounter. Rustic U.S outfit Califone mix such elements of familiarity with moody earthen melodies, and the results, particularly in the case of their excellent 'Quicksand/ cradlesnakes' album are remarkable.
Califone's combination of antique truisms and alt-country leanings, with a splash of lyrical nonchalance results in something smooth and lasting. This was the basis for my recent encounter with head-Califone Tim Rutili; he formerly of Red Red Meat and a multi-instrumentalist to boot.
Steve: 'I see 'Quicksand/ cradlesnakes' as a very 'architectural' kind of album; well-structured and very considered as to its dynamics and sequencing. Is there a story to the writing of this record and how it came together?'
Tim: 'We started with very skeletal song ideas; usually a chord progression, melody and words, and built them up in the studio. Three or four months of cycles: 2 weeks recording and 2 weeks off to write.
It seemed like the songs we started with were always asking for other songs. We worked a lot quicker than we usually do and we were less careful about everything and just tried to stay out of the way as it fell together. (We also) tried to put a little more into the writing and went a bit easier on the computer tricks. We all learned to listen better and trust ourselves more by making this record.'

Steve: 'There's a seamlessness to these songs where they appear 'linked' musically and especially lyrically. Were these songs written over a short space of time or inspired at all by specific events?'

Tim: 'It was all done in a relatively short span of time. The songs all feel like the inner dialogs of people and little smells surrounding events rather than events. It's all still unfolding for me whenever we play this stuff live.'

Steve: 'Given the subtle density of the songs instrumentally, was 'Quicksand/cradlesnakes' a consuming record to make?'

Tim: 'I think it's pretty sparse sounding.. All of us have way too many ideas. There was a lot of subtraction and editing in the mixing process. Once we got going it was a lot of fun to record. Lots of surprises.'

Steve: 'Califone does have a very 'organic' sort of sound; a lot of wonderful acoustics and percussive instruments appear on your records, but there's a warmth that goes beyond the instrumentation here. Would you say that the reality of what is great about Califone lies in the songs in their simplest form or do things really come together when the songs are 'created' in the studio?'

Tim: 'On '..Cradlesnakes' the songs should all have the ability and substance to get across on just a piano or acoustic guitar. We are making a record now that is the complete opposite. We started with nothing but sounds, improvisations, accidents and beats and built songs out of them. I think we are supposed to be exploring the balance between writing and allowing the moment and random chance to dictate what the music wants to be.'

Steve: 'There's obviously a core member-wise to Califone nowadays, but can you tell me how the band started out and what line-up changes have occurred since the band began?'

Tim: 'It started as me, Ben and Tim Hurley playing with a computer after the last Red Red Meat tours were done. Tim left to concentrate on Sin Ropas and it's been me and Ben ever since then. There's been all sorts of people in and out of the live band. I think around 20 different people. It feels pretty solid now with Jim Becker, Joe Adamik, Ben and me.. Hopefully everyone will stick around for a while.'

Steve: 'So what was the 'Quicksand/cradlesnakes' 'band' as such?'

Tim: 'Joe, Jim, Ben and me, and we toured with Matt Fields playing bass for a while. There were plenty of people coming to the studio to do overdubs and stuff too.'

Steve: 'There's a bent to Califone lyrically that recalls for me the songwriting of Tom Waits and even the great dEUS. Do you get a lot of people trying to have you 'make sense' of the lyrics, they being a major part of what is Califone?'

Tim: 'I love Tom Waits. I don't know dEUS. There are some people that love the lyrics and some people that are really annoyed by them. I love writing. I like the words to be more physical and visual. Open to whatever people hear. For me, these songs can open up over time only because they are not obvious.'

Steve: 'Is there a sense of unconsciousness in the lyrical side of the songs, or is the writing of the lyrics more 'craft than art'?'

Tim: 'Sometimes writing words feels like Xmas, like receiving a gift. Sometimes I don't think it comes from me, I just have to stay ready when it comes. It seems like the writing part is just spilling without letting your brain get in the way and the editing part is where it becomes a song. The trick is to not edit the life out of it or impose some meaning on it.'

When Tim provides insights like those into his own work, it's somehow no surprise to discover that Califone are also keen music fans, keen enough to run their own label, Perishable.

Tim: 'We set up Perishable in 1992 to release the first Red Red Meat records. We put it down for a while when we started working with Sub Pop. In 1998 we started it again to release a record we did with Rex called 'Loftus' and we've been pretty active since then. We are planning to do more records with Thrill Jockey and we will do more stuff through Perishable too.'

Steve: 'What do you like about the process of putting out music through your own label?'

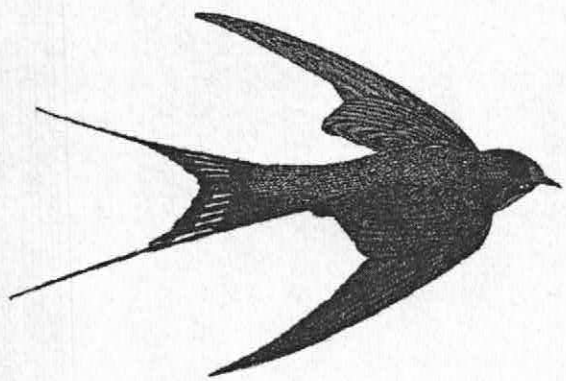
Tim: 'There are some things that need to be in the World that would never see the light of day if we didn't do this. The Fire Show records, Orso, the first Fruit Bats record, Friend/enemy, Joan of Arc, Drumhead. We love this stuff and it's a pretty amazing thing when it enriches someone else's life as much as it does ours.'

Steve: 'Is it true that Califone recently recorded soundtrack music of some description for release via Perishable? You've done similar releases in the past, right?'

Tim: 'We have a few of them. They're called 'Deceleration one' and 'Deceleration two'. The first one is a live recording of a show where we improvised to film loops in the first set and played a soundtrack to a film called 'The Mascot' in the second set. 'Deceleration two' is music for 'Francis', which is a short film that I wrote and Brent Green animated. 'Fireworks', which is a film by Jeff Economy, and a 1922 film version of Oscar Wilde's 'Salome' that we recorded live. We did small pressings in hand-made packages. We're working on a DVD project now where we're compiling all the 'Deceleration' films and music and adding a few more animated films by Brent.'

It'd be easy to waste a lot of space on music that had no substance and plenty of charisma. I mean let's face it, the stores and the charts of full of it. But music like that which permeates from Califone is precious and timeless, two traits we here at Sensory Projects both respect and admire. You can hear Califone's 'Vampiring again' on our latest compilation CD 'A small universe of song'.

'Quicksand/cradlesnakes' is available now via Thrill Jockey.



colleen

In the vein of Susumu Yokota, Qua and the exquisite Pretty Boy Crossover comes colleen: the brainchild of 27 year old French lass Cecile Schott.

Her debut for the UK label leaf, 'Everyone alive wants answers' was released this year to some critical acclaim, and it's no surprise really as the 13 track album is a work of depth and consideration.

An English-speaking French gal, Cecile was far better than us at emptying out a throng of glimmering tales about colleen and the innards of her inception as a musician, as you'll see!

Cecile, there's something very classical about the music on 'Everyone alive wants answers', especially in the first five tracks which are beautifully 'antique' and carefully structured. There's a feeling of composition versus song. Do you have any background in so-called 'classical music' per se?

Cecile: No, not at all, though in a way I'm currently « building » myself a background in so-called « classical » music. I'm actually forcing myself to learn how to read music at the moment because I've started taking cello lessons, but I don't come from a musical background at all, neither classical nor any other type of music.

I'm afraid my parents didn't have a terribly good taste at the time I was growing up! The only good thing we had at home was a dub compilation tape. It had some great Lee Perry tracks on it, they must have bought it by mistake - a real miracle! Recently I've become quite a fan of baroque music, especially music for string ensembles, and in particular music for viola da gamba (the cello's ancestor, sort of). If you listen to music for small ensembles or solo instruments from that time a lot of it is incredibly rich and yet very minimal and also very poppy in its own way.

'One night and its gone' and 'Goodbye sunshine' indicate a percussive side to Colleen.

I think that's very interesting because for the most part this album was created via a computer, is that true?

Cecile: The album was actually entirely created from samples taken from already -existing records, reworked and processed on a computer until I felt they were my own. There are no «beats » as such on the album, mainly because I can't do rhythm, whether on a computer or on real instruments(I have a really bad sense of rhythm!), so I try to stick to what I know I do best, melodies. But it's true that there is sometimes some sort of « ticking » in certain tracks, due to the way the samples are cut (unevenly - and 99% of the time that's on purpose) and due to the fact that sometimes the sampled instruments are a mix between melodic and percussive instruments - the perfect example being instruments like the vibraphone or celeste or glockenspiel.

Ultimately, what was it that was your original inspiration to write music?

Cecile: That's a hard one. I'd say that there are two possible answers, depending on whether we're talking about music made from samples or music where you create the notes and sounds yourself from scratch.

In the first case the music that already exists provides the inspiration: you listen to something, are struck by the beauty of it, you think you could make something else out of it, isolate the beauty and enhance it by that very isolation, or change it to make it even more beautiful. With music that you make yourself, I suppose that it's a mix between chance and the fact that the music must have been there all along in one way or another, waiting to turn into notes. But I can't say where the inspiration itself comes from. Perhaps it's not even a case of inspiration, I don't know. However there's one thing that's common to both approaches: I know what I want to *feel* when I listen to other people's music and my own music, a feeling of being both very moved and yet happy, and that ideal has been in my head for a very long time now, ever since I first heard musics which struck me. I have very vivid memories of listening to The Beatles' « a day in the life » for the first time when I was something like 14. I can really see myself near the record player in the living-room and playing it just before having lunch with my Mum and brother, and I remember it was almost like I felt my heart moving inside of me, physically.

And when I listen to this song nowadays, even though the effect it has on me is not as powerful, I can still feel that special something which I don't feel that often and which makes what I consider great music really special to me. I've been asked twice if I had a musical hero, and all I could answer was Johann Sebastian Bach, because really if there is one genius on Earth, it has to be him. He's written so much stuff, for all sorts of instruments, and all of it is great.

When I listen to this album my mind wanders to thoughts of you sitting in front of a computer playing with sounds and refining them carefully. What was the process of writing the album?

Cecile: Exactly the one you have in your thoughts! I think that's part of the reason why I was so happy to get back to playing real instruments when I had to prepare for my first live show! It can become really tiresome, sampling stuff, having to listen to all the samples by clicking on each one. When you come back from a hard workday you don't necessarily feel like sitting in front of a computer.

How did you set about the action of laying them down in a real form?

Cecile: With this album I just sat down and listened to all those samples, and they were born from that very process of selecting and working on the source material, and assembling it. The tracks themselves are inseparable from the « making » process. I mean without this process of sitting down and listening to everything there is no track, simple as that.

So how long had the songs of 'Everyone alive wants answers' been in your mind?

Cecile: As I said the beauty of it is that there is like a whole pool of music waiting to be born. Since the possibility of combinations of notes and sounds is infinite, I can't really say how long something has been there.

Now we call you Cecile but you use the name 'colleen' for your musical releases. Why colleen?

Cecile: I did an interview for an Australian radio show and the presenter told me that in Australia 'Colleen' is a popular name for 60-year-old women living in the countryside! I was gutted! I knew there was a risk of that happening though when I chose the name, but actually it should be written with a small « c », because I was thinking of the word « colleen » ('young girl' in Irish), not the name. I thought it was a nice-sounding, nice-looking name.

analogue sounds for the digital world

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SAM SHINAZZI'S C-MINUS PROJECT CD

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colleen>

I was looking for something which would be easy to pronounce for everyone (even French people), and I liked the softness in the writing of the « c » and « o » (a loop) and the fact that there are letters repeated in the word itself. I also thought it went well with a music based on loops. Also, when you say it in French, it sounds like the word « colline », which means « hill », again a nice image of soft lines.

Given its wonderful roster of artists, the Leaf label seems a somewhat obvious choice as the label to release your music. How did you get involved with Leaf?

Cecile: Right from the moment I started to make music using samples I knew I'd have to release an album, but first I got the opportunity of releasing a 7" on a French label called *Active Suspension*. That was a very good start but for various reasons there was no real possibility for me of releasing an album on that label at that point (just a year ago). So I decided to send about eight demos, only to non-French labels as I couldn't think of other French labels on which my music could « fit ». Thinking of labels on which my music wouldn't feel too « alien » was never obvious, since my music is based on samples but has an overall acoustic feel to it, and yet it's not « folk », it doesn't use a song format, has no singing on it, etc. Leaf were pretty quick and very concrete in their response to me, offering me a three-album contract, and so of course I said 'yes!'. I couldn't believe my eyes, as it was one of the biggest labels I'd sent the demo to!

What do you see as the most important connection between Leaf and colleen?

Cecile: I think the connecting points are mostly to do with the importance of melody and the fact that it's not a purely electronic label, especially with the latest albums released on leaf. I'm thinking in particular of the second Manitoba album, and of Asa Chang and Junray's album, both of which use quite a lot of acoustic elements. It's also a label that's diverse enough in its output to accommodate very different types of music, and so mine could fit into that diversity.

There are thirteen songs on 'Everyone alive wants answers'. 13 songs is a lot of music and I wonder at what point you determined that you had enough music for an album?

Cecile: Both Tony Morley (leaf's boss) and I immediately agreed that the album would have to be closer to 40 minutes than to 60 or 70 minutes, which i was very pleased with. I do think indeed that there's a limit after which your ears can't really pay attention to the music anymore. That's why with a lot of records you never get to know the end as well as the beginning. Also I remember very well from the time I used to copy albums onto tapes (something I did for about 12 years) that albums from before the CD age almost systematically fitted on a single side of 90 minute tapes. Often you had enough room for a couple of other tracks. I'm convinced that it's not just because originally albums were released on vinyl and so had to be quite short. 40 minutes is quite long already if you think about it. Making a rather short album is also a way of asserting that « good » music is nothing to do with quantity. This was even more important since most of my tracks are only between 3 and 4 minutes long, some are even under 3 minutes, and so I felt that it would become tedious for the listener if they had to « digest » too many bits and pieces; the coherence and unity would be lost, it would feel too repetitive. The demo I'd sent was very close to the finished album, so I already knew which tracks I liked best. Basically the main criterion for choice was whether or not I could still listen to those tracks after making them one year or even a year and a half before.

Are you a prolific writer of music?

Cecile: Not really. The scariest thing is that you never know if or when you're going to dry up, artistically speaking. What I mean by this is that making music (or writing novels, directing films, painting, taking photographs) isn't like being a stonemason or baker, it's not like a skill giving a product which caters for very precise needs which will always be there. So in a way I don't know how long I'll be lucky enough to keep on feeling inspired, and the thought of labels signing people for several albums is actually quite mad if you think about it. Anyway I don't want to scare you or your readers! I *am* working on other stuff!

How long have you been writing music?

Cecile: I'm 27 now and I've been doing music since age 15 when I got my first guitar, so that's 12 years! ..I always played my own stuff ever since the beginning. I was never that much into covers; my first band didn't do any, it was all original stuff.

Describe your life outside of music.

Cecile: I often feel like there are three different I's: there's the basic everyday I who goes about doing either the tedious aspects of life, like shopping for food, doing the washing-up, going to the laundry, or nicer things like reading, listening to the radio, etc. Then there's the English teacher who takes the Metro, the train and then the bus to finally arrive at the school where I teach pupils who are between 15 and 21 years old; prepares lessons, marks tests, then goes home knackered.

And then there's the creative musical I, who writes tons of e-mails to get live shows, who has been answering interviews for the past couple of months, and most of all who plays live (I love playing live), travels and meets people to play those live shows, and is now trying to find enough time in her life to make a second album and a film soundtrack for a French film due out next year. I must say I've never been the type of person who gets bored, but this life is really something and I love every second of it. I feel really really privileged and because you never know how long these things are going to last. I'm really enjoying it to the full right now. »

Delicate and beautiful with moments of sincere playfulness and soulfulness, 'Everyone alive wants answers', the debut album by Parisian schoolteacher Cecile Schott AKA colleen is available now via the leaf label(UK). Our latest compilation features the exquisite colleen track 'Ritournelle' from 'Everyone alive wants answers'.

Fruit bats

When I spoke to Fruit Bats singer/songwriter Eric Johnson he was cooking in his Chicago pad, making chili apparently, saying "I like hot food". It seemed to bare no importance back then, but now, after months of enjoying Fruit Bats' humbling pop sounds on their blissful second album 'Mouthfuls', his occupation preparing dinner that day seems hand-in-hand with his approach to songwriting.

Originally Fruit Bats was just Johnson: "..it was originally gonna be just this very weird folk band. This very strange psychedelic folk band." A while back he was joined indefinitely by musician Gillian Lisee, who provides harmonies, keys, bass and mandolin.

"She came into the picture right after the first record was recorded. We have sort of a rotating cast of members for the live group and she became my one permanent member of the live band. She's just got such a great ear that she's ended up sticking around and ended up being very involved on this record as far as arranging and writing, she's played half the instruments on it too.."

Food, like music, is a testy proposition at times, and we the listener are the ultimate critics. And like a good meal, a record is the result of a sometimes difficult process: trials and tribulations to get the right balance of ingredients, hoping the outcome is better then you'd hoped for.

Of their process in recording 'Mouthfuls' Johnson says: "..It turned out exactly the way we wanted it. For me it's always really hard 'cause I come up with a new concept for a new record like everyday. I have a really short attention span. Even when we were in the studio making this record I was thinking about the next one. I can't say for sure what it's going to be 'cause like I say I come up with a different idea everyday.. "

Eric's flights of fancy are not blaring on 'Mouthfuls', the songs indicating a movement towards something generally succinct, successful, and then over within a tidy four minutes or so.

"When we first had the idea for it we knew we wanted it to be more of a pop record than the first record. I think it came out just as mellow as before, which is fine, but it came out pretty much how we wanted. The first record was very folkish; sort of slow and weird. It's really sort of evolved. I have too much pop rock in me.. I think this record I sort of came to terms with that, like, 'it's OK'.. We wanted to make 'em so that they could be easily recreated live rather than the first record which was very layered and difficult to recreate."

'Mouthfuls' no doubt affords Fruit Bats the chance to explore the possibilities of its songs live with atleast a little flexibility. The sound and song that fills the record would appear to make for something musically quite timeless

"Gillian and I kinda got our musical schooling from Califone." And you can hear it, even just in Eric's application of electro-acoustic instrumentation and that aforementioned love of warm pop rock.

"The thing that makes us the same and the thing that makes us different is that Tim likes to take pretty themes and put a twisted spin on them, I go the other way around, I like to take twisted themes and try to make 'em pretty. Sort of doing the opposite thing to a similar effect."

'Mouthfuls' is a testament to great songs, and clearly Johnson has the ability to be as open to mood and melody in the same way as his Califone-countrymen. But he has soaring ambitions for the future.

"I'd like to be an artist like David Bowie who can make a completely different record everytime and nobody blinks. It's that it's expected. Some people can get away with it, I don't know if we'll be able to get away with it."

Don't you find that a distraction though? "No, not really. I think it just has to do with that I like all different types of music. Who knows? I say these things, I say "ah, it's going to be very different!", and then it comes out and it doesn't come out that much different. Somebody asked Keith Richards once why all his songs sound the same and he says, in the Keith Richards voice, "well 'cause I wrote 'em".

Take 'Mouthfuls' and get excited that there's it and plenty more where that came from.

Fruit Bats second record is out now on SubPop. 'A small universe of song'(attached) features the Fruit Bats track 'When U Love Someboby'.

CURSE OV dialect

By Bob Bakerfish

Located in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, Sunshine is a large multicultural urban centre populated by a complex mix of peoples, united in the main by their struggle to remain above the breadline. Proudly working class, its large population of unemployed young people has translated into an unfair focus on criminal and welfare issues, eschewing its historical contribution to Melbourne's development. Here you're as likely to see newly arrived migrants, walking down the street passing old diggers, as junkies, schoolkids or first time home buyers. In Sunshine anything's possible, and it's fitting that I'm here at the local kebab house to meet with Raceless; MC and focal point of the innovative hip-hop outfit Curse Ov Dialect, an outfit themselves not short on possibilities. Raceless has called Sunshine home for the past couple of years, partly in order 'to keep it real,' possibly due to the cheaper rent that living outside some of the trendier inner urban areas of Melbourne affords, and also to indulge to his self professed love of absurdity, which in a suburb like Sunshine you can't escape from.

"With our music absurdity and sociology go hand in hand," he offers between mouthfuls of his lamb kebab. "That's the whole thing, our music was never weird before. It's always been political, but I think the more you bang your head against the wall when it comes to being at odds with other peoples minds the more crazy you get and more absurd you have to become in your mind, just to know God I'm a fucking weirdo. What I do is different to other people. And eventually you become absurd and I think that's what happened to Curse.."

As with all absurdity there is an underlying serious side to Curse, and this is an aspect that Raceless is keen to articulate. "It's got a lot of socio-political meaning behind it, mixed with the crazy stuff as well," he suggests. "It was born from politics. I'd call it 'sociological avant-garde hip-hop' or 'multicultural experimental hip-hop'. Our music aesthetically, we take from all over the place."

What separates Curse from their contemporaries, aside from their innovative and at times peculiar sounds, is their amazingly energetic and theatrical live show, where the outfit deliver their messages in bizarre and confusing costumes. Creating an upbeat hip-hop pantomime experience, Curse ov dialect's live show is worlds away from the posturing and image manipulation that contemporary hip-hop suffers from. Forget brand name tracksuits, basketball singlets and baseball caps turned backwards, this is an outfit who are taking hip hop to a whole other level, taking as much from Faxed Head as Public Enemy. "You know when you see a traditional hip-hop gig there's two rappers and a DJ most of the time," suggests Raceless, "We just thought 'that's really boring most of the time' so let's have more fun with it. It wasn't a conscious gimmicky decision, we just did it to be more fun."

What began with a clown wig or a stupid assortment of similarly ridiculous outfits for a 'serious' hip-hop outfit to wear soon developed into more elaborate guises for the Curse. They also began to see a link between the costumes and their internal philosophies. "Recently it's worked well with our aesthetics," reports Raceless, "because one of the rappers in Curse Vulk Makadonski wears the Macedonian folk costume when he performs on stage. It's becoming more like our costumes signify ethnic diversity and influences, like the whole literal meaning of wearing your influence on your sleeve."

Ethnic diversity is integral to Curse's message and line-up. Current members of the quintet include Raceless, Vulk Makadonski, their DJ Paso Bionic, Atarungi, (who's name not only is the New Zealand word for witch doctor but wants it known that he believes that all humans are just energy, not necessarily the products of ethnicity), and August 2 (the date of World Anglo Indian Day), who apparently keeps changing his name.

Not only is there a large degree of significance in the names of each member and the associated underlying meanings, but each name also tends to reflect each members own particular obsessions that manifests itself in their raps. Each member, as Raceless will say repeatedly during our discussion, is very much on his own trip.

"Atarungi and August 2 are more poets, like me and Vulk are more actually rapping." reports Raceless. "Those guys are even singing and vocalizing in other ways. It's four vocalists and all of them do different things. And our DJ wears Adidas clothes so he's got the hip-hop."

Despite their crazed and energetic and at times seemingly out of control live show, Raceless is cautious about how Curse are perceived, concerned that the humour and weirdness of their live shows may dilute their message in some peoples eyes. For him it's important to stress that not only does Curse have a deep and profound love of hip-hop, but their approach which has evolved over the years initially came from within, with little consideration to how the band are perceived. "It's people who are just free and they want to let themselves go, and if it happens to be scary then what can you do," he offers. "We're not doing it purposely to be scary. We're just being ourselves. Because I'm the only one who really does that.

CURSE OV dialect

The rest of the guys pretty much do their thing. I'm the one that ends up stripping naked. It's not very hip-hop I know that.." He laughs for a moment before reconsidering. "I reckon it's hip-hop. I reckon people should start doing it. Breaking out the chains of what hip-hop's supposed to be about."

"I think Australia's got a pretty conservative music scene as well," he continues "and when we get up there we're looking at the whole world and the whole normality of the world. Everyone's so straight so we let ourselves go. It just comes out. It's not premeditated. It's like therapy. Social therapy. As long as people understand the message. I hate when people only focus on the performance."

Though occasionally it's hard not to. A few nights earlier at the Empress of India Hotel before a set by legendary Melbourne free jazz outfit Bucketrider, Raceless was on stage in a different guise. Under the moniker of Slesmr Tape and Videotape, he and a few others blended together an interesting concoction of live for the moment improvised hip- hop. Featuring piano, flute, drums, samples and three mc's, their sounds were a crazed mash of beats, chaos, wails amidst peculiar moments of unexpected cohesiveness. As always Raceless was in fine form, producing frantic stream of unconsciousness rapping and spasming through numerous schizophrenic personalities within the one sentence. Samples clashed, percussion and flute struggled valiantly to catch up as Raceless and fellow Curse Vulk Makadonski strutted and wailed around stage. 'You thought Curse Ov Dialect was weird!..' Raceless laughs at one point, before launching into the next track where he takes off his shoes, socks, and pants to hit a small oil drum in time with the beat. He then puts his jeans back on inside out; wearing them so low he bares his ass. Later he wanders out into the crowd in his underwear. ' We never rehearsed once' he brags before the music illustrates his point by stopping mid sentence leaving him hanging. 'Don't you ever do that to me again cunt!' he begins an over exaggerated ocker tirade against Atarungi, the sample operator before turning his attention to the audience. 'I'll fuckin take ya, I wanna see some fighting. We'll take any fucken cunt here.' He puts his arm around Vulk Makadonski. 'This cunt's from Altona Meadows and I'm from Sunshine. We're proud of our working class heritage.' When they finish he stumbles off stage. His first words are 'I don't know what we just did.'

"We feel that Curse Ov Dialect is becoming too mellow for us," confesses Raceless by way of explanation, "and we want to do something that is a bit more out there and heaps more experimental. Just to break it up, to make things more interesting, to tackle different aesthetics. Curse is definitely a hip-hop project but Videotape is just all of us going bananas, screaming, opera singers, flute players, hip-hop MC's and everything all mixed together."

Born out of a desire to perform when Curse can't due to other commitments, Slesmr Tape and Videotape first debuted at the Make It Up Club, a regular improvisational night at the Planet Café in Melbourne, populated in the main by jazz artists. "We thought why can't we just improvise with hip-hop," ponders Raceless. "It's the aesthetic that they're practicing with jazz done with hip-hop - improvising with beats, with the rapping. I guess it's just that hip-hop's come to the point like other types of music where a lot of things have been done and we're trying to get heaps free with it."

The artists who joined them on stage playing the flute, piano and drums of course had little idea what to expect having met the Curse only a week earlier, though compared to an audience schooled on avant-garde jazz, they possessed at least a vague idea. "It did shake up the people," he laughs. "I live out here in the West and a lot of the people were from Brighton or something, saying," with a mock English accent, "oh a bit of art', and we just came on and went 'aaah!'. And they were like 'Darling, what happened?' which was funny. That stuff brings back the days of old with Curse where we were heaps more crazy. We used to throw dog shit at the audience and stuff like that -which is in the past. We don't want to bring it back. It would land in wine glasses and stuff. It was fucking funny."

Regularly through our discussion Raceless bemoans the fact that the Curse are a little too out there to find a comfortable place in the local hip-hop scene. Whether it's their politics or bizarre stage activity, it seems the straight up hip-hop kids experience a little difficulty when trying to place the Curse. Interestingly their debut album 'Hex Ov Intellect' did find acclaim in the local hip-hop culture, though it seems the costumes may have altered perception somewhat. These days you'd be more likely to see the Curse sharing the bill with local DJ's or electronic artists than hip-hop outfits. Without doubt their sounds do owe much to hip-hop traditions, however it's their willingness to push outside the square in a genre not known for it's experimentation that makes them outcasts, finding themselves sharing the same music approach and aesthetic to the likes of the Anticon collective, Prefuse 73 and ofcourse Melbourne's infamous Symbiotic collective, of which Curse are aligned. In light of this the Curse have looked abroad for a home to release their latest album 'Lost in the real sky', finding a benefactor in San Francisco's Mush records, responsible for releases from Anticon collective upstarts Sole, Dose One, Why?, cLOUDDEAD and numerous others. Thanks to the strength and innovative character of their roster Mush might seem like an obvious label for Curse. Raceless reports that they took some convincing to even listen to the album. Sending off their demo they received no response. But that's where the dwarf comes into the picture.

"I like the label because the artists who are coming out on it are doing hip-hop that's different and these are the sort of people who I want to be associated with," he offers passionately.

curse ov dialect

(continued)

"We thought 'let's get beyond Australia this time'. So I started emailing the label 'did you hear the CD yet?' Everyday for about a month 'did you hear it did you hear it', and they were just like this guy's insane. And I left the most bizarre messages: 'If you don't listen to the CD then a little dwarf is going to touch you on the head at night,' stuff like that. And eventually they listened to it and they liked it and decided they wanted to release something new from Curse."

"We just really really wanted to be heard because we feel like we don't belong anywhere," continues Raceless. "We're so different from other people when it comes to the genre so we thought if we're that different, we're even more different than the Americans are as well so they've got to like it. Or they better like it, I don't know I'm just passionate about my music and we want to get it out there. But they really dug the new album."

Having never seen Curse perform live you get the sense that Mush are in for a rude but pleasant shock, though it's also gratifying for Curse to be judged solely on their sounds. Their new album has only recently been completed, and thus far feedback has suggested Public Enemy meets world music with some John Cage thrown in, or the early Avalanches crossed with Boredoms. As always it seems like an eclectic affair, the diversity of their ideology being evident in their palette, refusing to close their mind to the possibilities of any sound that crosses their path.

"It doesn't have to be funk or jazz," offers Raceless enthusiastically. "It can be rare groove backwards, it could be Spanish women digging holes in Madagascar with a frog sample. Why limit yourself to funk and jazz when there's at least 200 years of recorded music? Stuff from the '60's, psychedelic stuff, or Dada from the '20's or just stuff you hear when you walk outside on the street. There's so much going on and hip-hop," he corrects himself, "no, sample based music can never die because there's no limits. And we can have fun forever because we can always find something new to sample."

The debut record from Curse ov dialect, 'Lost in the real sky' is out now via Mush/Valve.

Frankie sparo

We've been solid advocates of the Constellation label for a few years now. From Fly Pan Am to Do Make Say Think, Godspeed You! Black Emperor to A Silver Mt. Zion and Hanged Up, the label has been responsible for some of the most intriguing and intense music this side of My bloody valentine, Mogwai or Sonic Youth.

Frankie Sparo is one chap who also finds his work released through the Montreal-based label. Sparo has two records out, his first, 'My red scare', released 2 years ago to some acclaim, and 'Welcome crummy mystics'. The latter is a beguiling work. Often overlooked for his well-profiled label-mates, 'Welcome crummy mystics' is the first true sign (we think) of the brilliance which is inside Sparo. Dark and textural, blocks of sepia guitars and strings draped richly over percussive beds, 'Welcome crummy mystics' looms and creeps deliciously. Sparo's scarecrow lyrics are seemingly cut-ups, Dadaesque in content but more personal than that. He makes it look so easy still. Maybe the first four tracks are the best opening four tracks of any record this year, maybe..

Q. (Steve)You appear to have a fairly distinct sound in mind on most occasions, how would you detail the process you use in your songwriting?

A: (Frankie)It varies. I don't adhere to any one single process. I've been very attached to the rather old-fashioned idea of "albums" for a long time though, so I tend to write songs in cycles, with a sort of birds eye view of how they fit together. I do pay close attention to sound, and I always have specific sounds in mind for specific reasons, but I'm not sure how to go into that without sounding like a complete wingnut.

Q. There seems to be an evolution in your records where you've become less theatrically inclined and more comfortable, even more confident in your songwriting.

Do you feel things have progressed much for you in this sense since 'My red scare'?

A: I've never felt theatrically inclined at all, but I think I know what you mean. When the first record came out I was still pretty much just writing for a few friends. I hadn't considered that people are bound to project all sorts of associations and notions of "persona" etc. onto something if the only clues they're given are some weird songs and a name. I've been trying to wriggle out of that position ever since, which may be what you're picking up on. I've also heard the first record called "too hermetic" - which to me is almost the opposite of "theatrical", but they're both fair criticisms, I guess.

This is only my second actual record, so hopefully it's still a bit too early to be talking about evolution in any meaningful sense. But sure, I'm writing better songs than I was a few years ago, or at least I ought to be!

Q. Was 'Welcome crummy mystics' unique or unusual in any way in terms of the writing of the record? There appear to be certain distinct themes running through it...

A: Well I went into it from one angle, then changed my mind and decided to start over halfway through - unfortunately that's not very unusual for me, as it turns out. So not really.

Frankie sparoFrankie sparo

I usually have a general sort of 'arc' in mind, and the thematic particulars don't start to emerge until I'm well into it. But I don't like to harp on about what those particulars might be, because I might be wrong. I'm always wary of artists who want to make a thing AND dictate/fence off its meaning - all that really tells an audience is "hello, I don't trust you (or this thing I made)".

Q. In terms of the time you spent on it, how does 'Welcome crummy mystics' compare to your previous two records?

A: The E.P.(with A Silver Mt. Zion) almost doesn't count - it was recorded on tour, at the VPRO studio in Amsterdam in single takes, and took just a little longer than its running-time to lay down. The first record took about a week and a half total, spread over a few months. 'Welcome Crummy Mystics' took a few more days but spanned almost a year, all told.

Q. You've got a large gathering of players on this record, do they/or some of them at least, create a band for you live?

A: Yes, Nadia(Moss) and I have been playing together for quite awhile now, and for the past couple of months we've been a four-piece, with the addition of Jessica(Moss) and our friend Scott. I'm beginning to think I'd rather start a group from scratch than have a regular "backing band" though. I know in many cases the distinction is just a nominal one anyway, but "backing band" obliterates all kinds of interesting possibilities (visual dynamics etc.) in a way that sort of makes my skin crawl.

Q. When you've assembled this band together to record, do they affect the resulting sounds of your lyrics and voice or do the players play around you, so to speak?

I recorded all the vocals last this time, and gave the players detailed but fairly abstract directions without ever singing them the songs, so I'd say the arrangements affected the vocals a fair bit. The exceptions were 'My Sistr' and 'This Lie', which were arranged around the main melody, and 'Caméra' which was picked over in several stages.

Q; The songs on this album appear to hold an amazing depth of timbre and sound on record, how easily can you translate this live?

A: 'Translate' is really the key word there. I'm no more interested in replicating records live than I am in making live-sounding records. The two things just aren't connected, to me. The songs get reworked pretty severely every so often for playing live though, and the ones that don't turn out to be conducive to a lot tinkering, arrangement-wise, tend not to get played as much.

Q. Efrim(from Godspeed You! Black Emperor) has said some great things about Hotel2Tango where you recorded this album, what makes it such an important part of the recording of your music?

A: It's run and lived in by people I know and love, and it's just down the street from my apartment.

Q. The place is given an almost spiritual symbolism by those who've worked in it, and I must say that all the records I've heard come out of it have an aura of something vaguely dark and mystically(but not clichéd), how important is any environment to the people in it, be it in a recording situation, songwriting situation or otherwise?

A: Pretty important I guess. The mythology that's sprung up around the Hotel is both wonderfully romantic and utterly silly. It's a loft near the train tracks. There aren't very many of those around here any more, which is a drag, but personally I try to keep these things in perspective.

Q. Of 'Camera', your vocals sound almost like a lullaby, what inspired this song?

A: I just wanted to see if I could write a song in French. Originally I wanted to get one of our francophone friends to sing it, but I decided against it at the last minute. I sort of wish I hadn't now.

Q. I'm curious about what were you doing before you were releasing records? Have you always been in bands etc?

A: Yeah, I started doing the 'Sparo stuff long before I ever thought of releasing any of it, and before that I was playing with friends in basements and whatnot for years. I don't really know how to do anything else."

Hear 'Welcome crummy mystics', Frankie Sparo's second album proper, and you'll no doubt be pleased that Frankie didn't become a taxi driver or a surgeon. His thespian approach to songwriting and arrangements is quite amazing, and I think, to be fair, the execution of the songs to tape is just getting better and better with each subsequent release. For a taste of Frankie's stunning work, check out the attached compilation CD which features the track 'Akzidenz grotesk'.

Frankie Sparo's 'My red scare' and 'Welcome crummy mystics' records are available now on Constellation.

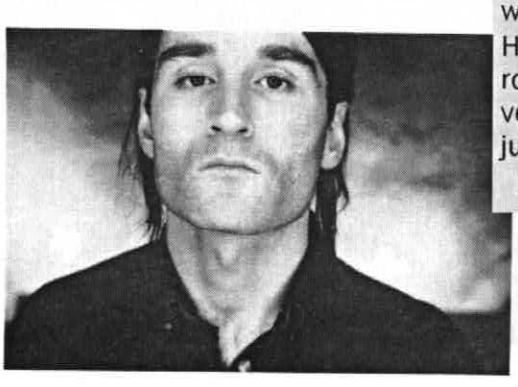
NMH = BLOOD RAW

Neil Michael Hagerty

has always seemed like the reluctant rock'n'roll role player.

Years ago, around the Nirvana 'hightimes'when a glut of rock bands were signed up by majors, Hagerty and his then wife and songwriting partner Jennifer Herrema -recording as Royal Trux- struck a million dollar contract with Virgin Music. Neither (justifiably) seemed plussed by the prospect of being caught up in the high-stakes of rock'n'roll at its most commercially treacherous; appearing increasingly more and more detached from the joy of making music and more involved in just keeping their heads above water in the face of what was no doubt significant artistic pressure from their new employer, resulting in an exaggeration of some pretty scary personal demons. Royal Trux's tempestuous existence ended around the time of their 2000 album 'Pound for pound', and Hagerty for one seemed relieved by the chance to take hold of his career, both personally and musically, and has since produced an album per year under his own name. But still to this day Hagerty appears void to the fact that he is a (minor but identifiable) rock figure, clearly more interested nowadays in writing, recording and touring.

Royal Trux's relationship with Virgin didn't last, maybe it was doomed from the beginning, and they returned to the confines of their 'motherland' record-label Drag City, who to this day continue to foster Hagerty and his work. His latest record 'The howling hex' is a sprawling affair; blues rock juxtaposing a kind of alt-rock alter-ego. In a sense Hagerty's dangerously punk-rock inspired work in Royal Trux has morphed into a sound more reliant on space and melody, and the result is Hagerty's talents have been given the room they needed to function on a whole new level.



After writing music for "..about thirty years but only in public for twenty", this kind of clarity is welcomed by Hagerty's fans, and has bought with it a whole generation of new fans.

So then, is Neil Michael Hagerty aging gracefully? Hagerty: "I hope not!" Has your sort of 'approach' to songwriting changed over the years? Hagerty: "It is much clearer now and stronger. Royal Trux was like writing and working for a sit-com with set characters and situations; sort of a chore sometimes. (Now) I don't have to fit into a concept like Royal Trux or write scripts for other people to execute.. but overall I do the same sort of methods; pulling small parts out of a larger flow of music and words."

Given their mutually glaring styles, one wonders how different it is putting together a Neil Michael Hagerty record than it was writing, laying out and then recording for any of the Royal Trux records? Hagerty: ".. now I don't have to play mind games with an audience in order to banish the detrimental effects of expectation while attacking the complacency of gratification. I can just make the music and then back it up by a singular representative (myself) and take all the consequences into my own life."

As expected there's a lot of 'feeling' exposed when we approach the idea of talking about Royal Trux. He and Herrema were together a long time and their roller-coaster lives seem to have only recently come to some sort of slow-down.

Hagerty: "I just finished a divorce proceeding and property split from Jennifer and so I don't have anything to do with her. Royal Trux is really dead; no chance of a reunion. If there is something else with that name eventually I don't have anything to do with it."

The upside for us all is that Neil Michael Hagerty's work has never seemed to be stronger than on 'The howling hex', an album which is a clean cross-section of studio work brimming with the sort of confidence and energy that had sometimes betrayed Royal Trux and appeared lacking on Hagerty's first recordings post-RTX. It's probably not coincidental then that 'The howling hex' is also Hagerty's first record with 'a band', The Howling Hex.

Hagerty: "'The Howling Hex' play simple rock and roll songs but live we want to investigate the spirit of the song in the time just now.

Over the years I have learned on the fly (because of economics) to quickly instruct musicians and get them to play the right things the right way and also to be able to put something of themselves into it. On this record I had several groups of songs that would go along with various units and also I toured a lot so one of the bands was more road-worn and the other groups were fresh. I also combined these groups via the studio and processed some recordings in the computer to remove them completely from any intentionality; to examine the sound more than the effect."

And throughout Hagerty's songs on 'The howling hex' there is that sense of 'jamming' and taking sounds and songs wherever fate may lead them to, Hagerty leaving melodic and percussive signposts as the markers of time and progress.

Interesting as it is that 'The howling hex' contains numerous musical 'elongations'.. (Hagerty: "indulgence is an *unfortunate* word..") including the closing track 'Energy plan', the scurgy 'Creature catcher' and the excellent cavalcade of 'Rockslide', the latter two both recorded live and capturing the essence of where Hagerty, for the main part, appears to be artistically right now, and seemingly that's a pleasant space for him to be in, and we are reaping the aesthetic benefits.

'Neil Michael Hagerty and The howling hex' is out now via Drag City.

Manitobaman..

Seemingly reaching a crossroads in his musical career some ten years too early, Canadian mathematician-cum-classically-trained-musician-cum-electro-smartass with soul, he by the name of **Manitoba** *- Dan Snaith by deed poll- has just recently unveiled to the World his latest , and second opus, the tentatively structured 'Up in flames'.*

By a crossroads I'm referring to Snaith's rather algebraic sidestep from the humble gittering beats and tinkering melodies of his first -and altogether monumental record 'Start breaking my heart'- into a whirlpool of significantly more psychedelic-rock inspired sound. Not to suggest that 'Up in flames' is sans electronics, quite the contrary, it's awash with a veritable frenzy of samples and computer driven beats, sniggering touches and tempura'd analog suggestions. The albums ten tracks find the talented youngster delving into the music of his early youth and beyond; a concoction of influences from Pink Floyd and the Beach Boys to the Aphex Twin and Boards of Canada and Hood. It's no doubt then that 'Up in flames' at least in part contradicts Snaith's debut, but moreso this record seems to be a solidification of where he truly wishes to be musically.

"Because a lot of the artists that I'd been compared to with the first album, and a lot of that sort of minimal electronic music has sort of let me down in the last couple of years, the one sort of thing that I knew for sure was that I wanted to make a bigger sounding record. When I think of a bigger sounding record the obvious influences are y'know, the obvious points of reference are My bloody valentine, The Beach Boys, and like people that produced great records or whatever. Instead of being compared to those sort of artists or whatever, those early sort of 'Nineties psychedelic kind of people, and people say that it sounds different or whatever, I guess I'm not really very conscious of what it's ended up sounding like when I make the music, or even to a certain extent looking back at it now I'm just so immersed in it that it's tough for me to say."

While 'Up in flames' does exude an air of faintness; a lingering sense of something organic and altogether retrospective on one hand, like its predecessor is has an originality which rises above it's being formed through the familiar. Snaith plays on beautiful sounds('Jacknuggeted') and triggers purposefully melodies that are both fresh and wonderfully vivid(see 'Bijoux'). As 'Up in flames' hits paydirt in both the anthemic and melodic stakes, the line between rock and electronic music is blurred in much the same way as DJ Shadow's 'Endtroducing' obscured it some 8 years ago through tracks like 'Twins' and 'Kid you'll move mountains'.

But rather than obscure the line, Snaith, as a result of his growing frustration with electronic music 'scene', continues to move to crush the line altogether.

"There will probably be people who are always willing to stand and watch somebody play a lap-top but I think definitely people who are doing different things are the ones whose live shows are being acclaimed, who people are excited to go and see. I think definitely people have reached a stage when they're like "hang on, wait a minute, what's going on here? I'm just watching a guy check his e-mails for two hours or whatever." I think somebody needs to give a little bit. I mean this music on this album doesn't make any sense to me being played any way other than with a band pretty much. The lap-top shows (he did on tour in Australia late in 2002)went down really well, I had a really good time doing them or whatever, but it's still a lot more fun for me to basically bang a drum kit and s*%t like that than it is to fart around on the lap-top for a while."

So where 'Start breaking my heart' took the humbleness of his good friend Kieren Hebden(AKA Four Tet), the lucid moments of Autechre, Cornelius and the Aphex Twin, and the simple melodies of the Beach Boys, and a pinch of that German free-jazz logic from FS Blumm and Kammerflimmer Kollektief, and worked the combination into something thoroughly adorable, 'Up in flames' shifts into something more akin to the then ground-breaking indie rock of Nineties Brit-pop undertowers like My Bloody Valentine, Lush, Spiritualized, Flaming Lips and even The Stone Roses. Snaith's age is showing, all 24 years of him, and through 'Up in flames' the beguiling musical equation nears something science could barely deliver.

"I definitely didn't have any sort of specific plan like I wanted it to be like '19% this and 23% that' and whatever. It just kind of comes out the way it does. The only thing I was thinking of was that I wanted to make a bigger record. I'm just making music just for the fun of it and there's no master plan when I'm doing it."

And 'Up in flames' is without question a big record; layer upon layer of sound, nuance and rhythm, jazz breaks and samples. Texture takes on new meaning on tracks like 'Every time she turns round it's her birthday', a searing Jason Pierce-inspired piece of psychedelic electronica only The Boredoms before Pierce or Japan's Boredom's might have ever been brave enough to approach.

Manitoba's 'Up in flames' is available now via the Leaf label, in fact, the label have just made available a 2CD repackaged edition of the album.

'a small universe of song'

-A Sensory Projects compilation-

(Track number, artist, track title)

1. FRUIT BATS - 'When U love somebody'
Written by Eric Johnson. Tune lifted off Fruit Bats' second album 'Mouthfuls'. Fruit Bats appear with thanks going out to Sub Pop Records. www.subpop.com

2. INTERNATIONAL KARATE - 'Only good will come of this'
Written by International Karate. Previously unreleased track, recorded live January 2003 at Backyard Stacks II. www.cavaliermusic.com/sensory-projects

3. FRANKIE SPARO - 'Akzidenz grotesk'
Written by Frankie Sparo, originally appeared on Frankie's second album 'Welcome crummy mystics'. Sparo appears with thanks to Constellation and Frankie Sparo. www.cstrecords.com

4. HOWE GELB - 'Piango'
Written by Howe Gelb, this track features on 'The listener', and it is here with thanks to Thrill Jockey Records. www.thrilljockey.com

5. SUMMER HYMNS - 'Be anywhere'
Written by Zachary Gresham. Taken from the album 'Clemency'. Summer Hymns appears courtesy of Misra Records. www.misrarecords.com

6. cOLLEEN - 'Ritournelle'
Written by Cecile Schott. This song was lifted off of colleen's debut album 'Everyone alive wants answers', released on the leaf label. Many thanks to leaf for allowing us to air it here. www.theleaflabel.com

7. CALIFONE - 'Vampiring again'
Written by Tim Rutili, as featured on the Thrill Jockey label release 'Quicksand/cradlesnakes'. Many thanks to Perishable Records and Thrill Jockey. www.perishablerecords.com

8. THE RECTIFIERS - 'Beautiful bird'
Written by Volk/Denham/Volk. Track originally appeared on The Rectifiers second album 'Wear the weight of the resting sky', released on Sensory Projects. www.cavaliermusic.com/sensory-projects

9. QUA - 'Stranger comforts have slipped by'
Written by Cornel Wilczek. Appears with thanks to Preservation, and was originally found on their 'Motion: movement in Australian sound' compilation. www.preservation.com.au

10: OVIL BIANCA - 'Ten sissy'
Written by Tim Wijnant, taken from the album 'The Wide Album'. Thanks to (K-RAA-K) for permission and to Tim.

11. GUITARKUS - 'Balance of nature'
Written by Guitarkus. Also appears on 'Ants farm aphids', a Symbiotic collective compilation, released on Symbiotic/Sensory Projects. www.symbioticsystem.com

12. LOVE OF DIAGRAMS - 'Building better codes'
Written by Love of diagrams. Features on the bands debut album 'The target is you', and appears with thanks to Unstable Ape and Tim Picone. www.uar.com.au

13. THE SHINS - 'Kissing the lipless'
Written by James Mercer, taken from The Shins' 'Chutes too narrow' album release. This track appears with thanks to Sub Pop Records. www.subpop.com

14. SUN - 'Sleepin'' (remixed by Hrvatski)
Written by Sun, the 'Sleepin'' remix is from Sun 'Remixes', released on Preservation. Appears with thanks to Sun and Preservation. www.preservation.com.au

15. DAMIEN JURADO - 'Abilene'
Written by Damien Jurado. This track also appears on the fifth Damien Jurado album, 'Where shall you take me?'. Appears with thanks to Secretly Canadian/Sensory Projects. www.damienjurado.com

16. THE STRUGGLERS - 'The light and I'
Written by Brice Randall Bickford II. This song appears on the album 'The new room', available on Tract. This track appears with thanks to Thomas Heath and Tract.

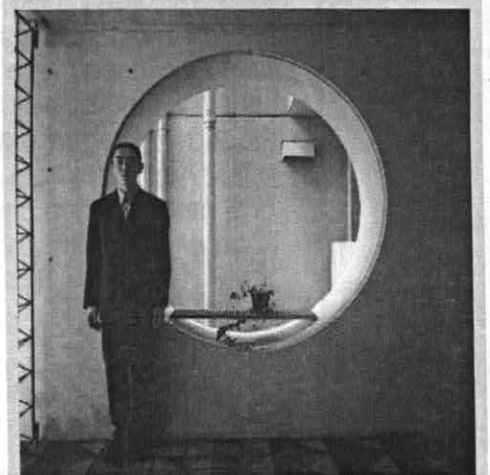
17. IRON & WINE - 'Promising light'
Written by Sam Beam. This song can be found also on Sam's debut album 'The creek drank the cradle', released on Sub Pop Records. www.subpop.com

NOBUKAZU TAKEMURA

~IN THE EYES OF A CHILDS EYE~

Arguably THE most prolific musician of our age, Nobukazu Takemura appears to be enthralled in the business of making music and it being a direct connection to life, and not simply art.
I recently interviewed Nobukazu for the second time in twelve months, curious about his exquisite '10th' album, and also perceived wavering interest in remaining so productive.

SP: "Just after your last album 'Hoshi No Koe' came out, you told me "my interest in music lessened during this year, and I sold many instruments. I may stop making music in the near future."
Given that a year later you are showing no true signs of slowing down, was this just a bad day, a bad patch, or are these feelings still lingering?
NT: In a way, that statement came true. People sometimes misunderstand, but I consider the music I make for myself as my true 'artistic' pieces, and the production, remixes, live shows, and music for commercials that I do due to exterior factors as work, and I draw a clear line between the two. Therefore, as I announced previously, I haven't made any new musical pieces for myself in several years. But I still do musical work to make a living.
SP: You released the 'Sign' album alongside 'Hoshi No Koe' last year, did it end up getting the release you intended as a book and a video?
NT: The American version is a double CD. In Japan the CD and promotional video are separate, and the video is not for sale. Moshino (the painter) is talking of making a picture book or DVD, and apparently there is some interest from toy companies in making figures of the characters in 'Sign'. So there is still more possibilities in new developments for that record. I think it would be wonderful if these things really happened.
SP: Your new album is '10th', is it your really only your tenth album?
NT: Actually I have released more than ten albums in total, but just to create a punctuation point, I used this title for this record.
SP: Is it an achievement for you to have recorded so many songs and albums?
NT: I don't want to be bound by the things I have done in the past. I'm not trying to say that it is important to be changing all the time, but I don't want to lose the enthusiasm that I first had when I started in music. I want to always be able to have new discoveries, be surprised, and be moved. The word 'child' symbolizes that state of being for me. I want to be faithful to what I really want to do, so right now I am only doing commercial work with music. Presently, what I really want to call my 'art' is outside of music - visuals, games, and graphics.
SP: '10th' rings throughout with beautiful melodies. Was there an effort made to concentrating on producing more melodic structures on this album?
NT: Melodies are being forgotten in the world, so I decided on that direction for this record.
SP: Melody has always seemed to have been more incidental on your past albums than on this one, would you agree?
NT: I think that depends on the individual listening to my music, but personally I have always placed a lot of importance on melodies. However, melody does not always have to mean a relationship between phrasing and accompaniment. I hear melodies in drums, noises, and any other sounds that don't necessarily have pitches.



SP: Why is this album so affected with vocals?
NT: In today's music, melodies are being neglected, and are being created too easily. There is too much importance placed on lyrics, or so called 'emotional' singing that exaggerates the use of vibrato.. Generally, vocal music is created by first writing out a chord progression, and fitting a melody line to those changes. However by doing that, melodies get buried in the accompaniment. Without realizing that, vocalists sing excessively so that there melodies don't get muddled in the accompaniment. Vocal music that makes too much use of vibrato or shouting is because the melodies don't stand out unless the singers do that. In this case, the songwriting, songwriter, arranger are at fault. The singer might feel that something is wrong, but ends up exaggerating their emotions, which creates a sort of comical vicious cycle. If there are points in the song where the notes, C, E, G form a harmony, I choose not to use those notes. I like to use notes that formal musical training would teach you not to use. In the former example, I would use notes like C sharp or G flat. Not only in my personal works, but even in remixes, I tend to stick to those kinds of melodic ideas. By doing so, the melodies stand out without having to resort to exaggerated forms of singing.
SP: Is your music always a reflection on your own frame of mind at the time of writing?
NT: That is one way to put it, but there is no way to prove that there is a relationship between my mental thoughts, and the sounds that are generated. One thing I can say is that I truly value impulses.
SP: Please describe how these songs were produced in the studio.
NT: By creating melodies, harmonies, and rhythm...the normal way of making music. For me, a good melody is a melody that has the opposite movement of the accompaniment. In other words, counterpoints are central for me, and not harmonies or chords."

-NOBUKAZU TAKEMURA-

IN THE EYES OF A CHILDS EYE

SP: "With all your albums there is a sense of bringing the listener back to an 'organic' aesthetic. Given the predominance of electronics in your work, is it easy or difficult to record music which has such warmth/soulfulness?
NT: This is hard to explain, but to put it simply, I feel that music resides in the mind of the listener. We tend to deify musicians, composers, and singers, but we are actually being moved by the laws of music, harmonies, melodies, rhythms, tonalities, and not the power of those people. In daily conversations about music, we tend to say that we were 'moved by the vibrato in the singer's voice, because it reflected the singer's life'. However, there is no exact relation of cause and effect between that singer's life, and the way that person's voice sways. In other words, the listener is tying together that information of his/her own accord. Therefore, at that moment, the truly creative person is the listener. That is why it is possible to generate sounds from the computer that would move listeners, and even with '10th', if I didn't tell people, many would believe that the vocals were sung by an actual human being. The music doesn't have to be created by a human being. Like any listener, you just have to listen subjectively in order to conjure up infinite images and ideas. Instead of an over exaggerated human voice, a machine can have a deeper expressiveness. It is hard to truly explain what is great music, but we can be sure that great music moves people. I play instruments also, and for me, traditional acoustic instruments, synthesizers, turntables are all equally great tools to use. I think it is nonsense when people say that "electronics are cold", and they only say that from preconceptions they have. We must not forget that there is electricity running even in human bodies."
A man dedicated to substance and nobility, Nobukazu Takemura is an intriguing and intense musician of untellable magnitude. His experimentation and elegance has made him an important figure globally in electronic music circles, and albums like '10th' only further his renown.

Takemura's wonderful '10th' is available now on Thrill Jockey, alongside the more recent EP 'Assembler/Assembler 2'.

KINSKI

+Prog rock's children speak

The renowned Seattle record label Sub Pop have turned the corner recently after what seems like a long run of records which failed to capture any sense of energy and attitude beyond the routine. The label which -with the help of other U.S. labels like Amphetimine Reptile and Touch and Go- helped create the phenomenon that was 'grunge' back in the early Nineties was the home of both the seminal and the revered from Mudhoney to Nirvana, Tad to Soundgarden, Eric's Trip and Sebadoh. Now, with fine recent releases from inspired pop-upstarts The Shins, balladeer Iron and Wine, alt-country pop weirdoes Fruit Bats, Baptist Generals and Holopaw, The Thermals, and also the sonically empowered Kinski, Sub Pop are seeming finally back to pouring their resources into significantly more impressive releases. One of *the* most sustaining for me has been the third album by Seattle space-rock exponents Kinski, 'Airs above your station'; a mix of throttle-bore fuzz-rock pieces, ambient lingerings and shadowy drone-tempered affairs of the guitar, not quite what we're accustomed to from the Sub Pop stable, and justifiably Kinski's juvi-axeman Chris Martin was initially tentative about forming a connection with the label based on their significantly instrumental-rock-less catalogue.
"We were really hesitant when Sub Pop was interested. We were really debating 'well is this the right move?', 'cause so many people have a preconception of what Sub Pop is. But they have put out a lot of different kind of records over the years but I think a lot of people, certainly space-rock or whatever you wanna call it, is not something you associate with them. So we just figured 'what the hell!', they've got really good distribution and they sent it to a lot of writers.. I always wonder if people flip it over in the record store and see the Sub Pop name and not listen to it.

So how did that Sub Pop connection come about?
I think it was mostly just our reputation in Seattle. Just from playing shows in Seattle. I think the Sub Pop people, with their base there, had just seen us in shows. We were in the middle of recording the record actually and they called us. We were paying for the record ourselves, we didn't have a label or anything. We said "let's just finish this record ourselves and once it's done and mixed we'll send it to you and see what you think", so that's the kind of way that went. We actually finished it about a year ago from now, I think we finished mixing in last April. Sub Pop.. dealing with them took about 4 or 5 months, then once you sign up you have to wait another 4 months and that's why there was a bit of a lag."

With their previous album out on small U.S. record label Pacifico and their debut 'Space launch for Frenchie' released by Kinski themselves, the four piece are new to the bright-lights-big-city-type reputation of Sub Pop, but Chris for one doesn't seems phased by their signing with the famous source of American indie-rock, rather Kinski are happy to have their record out and to have another chance to play outside of their hometown.

"Do you enjoy getting out on the road and playing? Yeah, I wish we could do it a little more, it's just everyone's schedules and personal lives.. We're just not one of those bands that can go out for 8 or 10 months of the year but when we do go out we all have a great time. We've actually toured quite a bit. Not huge like two months kinda thing, we prefer to go out for like three weeks. I think we've toured the country like 3 or 4 times total. **So Kinski is not then a full-time consideration for your all. Are you still sort of viewing it as being in the building process?** Yeah, we all still have out day jobs and it's not really a big money making venture right now so we're just trying to do as much as we can. We've actually been out every month for the past few months so we're just trying to keep a regular day job kinda life and still work around tours and stuff which can get a bit tricky but it's been going well so far."

Somehow it's refreshing to meet musicians who are still holding down a *regular job* and see the process of writing and recording music as being a pleasure and a pastime and not *work*, but contemplate the soaring energy of a track like 'Schedule for using pillows and beanbags' or the ambience of 'Steve's basement' and the altogether etherealness of 'I think I blew it' and you'll see that Kinski's days are writing chart-topping melodies and memorable pop hits are either a long way off -or a long way gone. In talking about the types of people who've influenced the band, Martin reels off names like "Faust and Ashra Temple, and Cluster and a lot of German things, and also a lot of the more current Japanese psychedelic rock." This is stuff most of us are unlikely to encounter in our daily scouring of the shelves of our local record stores. Still, for lovers of modern day gladiators of post-rock like Mogwai or International Karate and in Martin's own words, "space-rock or whatever you wanna call it", Kinski will not doubt strike a familiar chord.

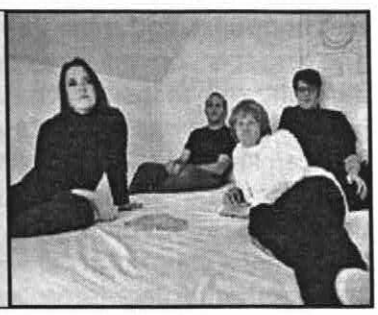
"You must be pleased with what you managed to achieve on this new record given that it's an absolute powerhouse of sound and amplification. It's actually probably one of the better sounding records I've heard in a long time. Did you sit around writing the songs and have visions of how you wanted them to turn out sonically on the record?

We had been playing the material on that record for about 8 months or so. We did a big five week U.S. tour and toured Japan, so we kinda had a good idea of what we wanted all those songs to sound like. We met with this guy Kip Beelman who engineered and co-produced it. And we just had this kind of complicated plan about how we wanted to go about recording it. We recorded it in kind of different bits and pieces. Kip really helped us just sort of achieve what we all talked about. There was little differences but it was the band just going in and playing live. That's the way the basic tracks were. But it was sort of a more complicated record than anything we've tried before. We were happy with it but I think the next record we do will probably be a little bit more straight forward as far as the band just going in and playing live.

Something I noticed about 'Airs above your station' is that there is an obvious deviation between tracks. Stylistically some are more ambient than others, but one of the best thing is that you've managed to keep that *linear of* sound; even where there's not a lot of sound it's still out there and sounds full and even rather rich, which doesn't seem to be the approach of I guess a lot of other bands who might be undertaking a similar style of music, would you agree? Ah yeah and I think Kip, he had a lot to do with that because he really wanted to record all the sort of quiet bits and ambient pieces really loud and full and deep and have it be as full as a rock part but not have the rock part lose its power even though the quiet parts were sort of present and up in the mix. I think that's what he contributed mostly to the record is exactly what you're talking about."

The sonic aptitude that Chris talks about so humbly is one of the strengths of 'Airs above your station'. Where tracks rollick with pummeling rhythmic structures there are opposing forces that reduce the pressure to something far more ambient; pieces tarred with Eastern washes and spatial spreads. Maybe it's no surprise that a stalwart label like Sub Pop finally caught onto the most recent of genres, the forever morphing 'post-rock' with it's sound-bending ways and it's finger dipping, thankfully if their eggs are for now in the basket alongside talented young people like Kinski, things will no doubt continue to look up.

'Airs above your station' by Kinski is out now on Sub Pop. For more on Kinski there's: www.kinski.net



love of diagrams

Every now and then you get a little over excited. I think the mind just craves a bit of commotion sometimes. Earlier in 2003 I found myself jumping pogo-like around the lounge-room, punching the air and shaking my head, eyes closed, my mind.. disconnected. It was, liberation in a time of astute concentration 24-7 solid. It felt great. And this is after all, the power of music.

On this occasion it was Melbourne 3-piece Love of diagrams, on the stereo, on fire. With the kind of relentless, calculated energy that used to have us all riled up over Sonic Youth, Fugazi, The Stooges and maybe even Joy Division, Love of diagrams make for invigorating listening when they're not being sublime. The sign of a great debut I think. Somehow the exuberance I felt from 'The target is you' seems rare, and the expression of energy that it inspired even rarer nowadays. I set out with Love of diagrams folks Antonia(bass) and Luke(guitar) to find out why, and maybe even how their wonderful energy was bore.

A: "For ages we were just jamming. We never even really thought about playing gigs or playing to crowds, it was just this thing that we all kind of did. They were really repetitive long songs where we'd kind of work up a dynamic and it was all that kind of thing, and then we played our first show maybe a year later, and that was when we went 'f*%k! We've got to make our songs shorter'. There were certain nippings and tuckings that we needed to do."

S: "What was the impetus for doing that?"

A: "It's just the experience of getting up there in front of people who are expectantly (standing) with their hands crossed, sort of waiting, 'so what are you gonna do?', and us being this incredibly nervous band and playing these songs that needed time to build up. I think that really sort of shook us into saying "right, let's formulate this better. Let's try and compact what we're trying to say here into a package that we can do live". And the songs changed as well 'cause we got so nervous that we'd play them ten times too fast, so we became this kind of fast, dynamic band."

L : "We don't wanna be struggling to play music that you play live either, you wanna be able to play music that you can get into on stage. I'm not standing there struggling to play the songs I'm standing there enjoying myself, though I don't necessarily express that very much. I'd hate to be in a band where you have to be concentrating to try and get something right."

The sense of structure and form vs. something raw and unadulterated is the key to Love of diagrams. 'The target is you' and their live show correspond perfectly with respect to these things. Live they dispel something anxious but so refined that it sort of bleeds electricity. The record has that raw, Thermals quality to it, despite being quite decent in the fidelity stakes. But the record right or wrong seems to be the place these songs most sit well in, the result of time and a rather testing recording situation.

A: "It was the hottest weekend of the Summer, the 44 degree day weekend, in Reservoir(in Melbourne's northern suburbs). It was really hot and the amps got really hot and all the recording gear heated up and it was just insane. So they were the conditions. I think we recorded all the tracks in a long weekend. It was live with a degree of separation and Luke did some extra guitar tracks. I fixed up a few bits on the bass(laughs) and there's one really spur of the moment keyboard bit, which is just funny really, and vocals which have never happened live. There is a really great feedback section where we had a lot of fun recording like 6 tracks of feedback, which was fun."

L: "The record, for us, we recorded when we had 12 songs that we got to a point with where we'd worked on them enough and developed them enough that we were really really happy with them, and we were playing them the best we ever had. And we wanted to get them down so we could get to writing new ones. That probably took us a year or whatever to get to that point. Then there was dropping ones off and picking up new ones, now there's a few new songs in the set. When we get to that point again in another year, when we've got another ten of them to their peak.. I think we were fairly faithful to what we're like live. I think a lot of local records you just sorta get it and you're just disappointed because you think 'oh they're just so much better live'.."

A: "I hope that our album is exciting to listen to and it works in the same kind of way live.."

S: "One of the fantastic things about Love of diagrams is your simplicity and the beauty within that. Has music (in general) become more complicated in an effort to capture people's imagination?"

A: "In a live sense(yes). ..Anything goes with records. I like listening to records that go on and on, but live I think it's important to keep people's attention. It's gotta be working and I think it's hard to make really long songs work."

L: "But long doesn't mean complicated. Look at Neu! and Can; They play really really minimal songs that go for 20 minutes. I think not so much in terms of being complicated or simple, I think a lot of people try too hard. I watch a lot of bands and you can see what they're trying to do. They're just trying really hard at getting that sound and I think that's a matter of people emulating other people too much, but also having an idea of what the music should sound like and struggling to make it sound like that. The bands that I have been really inspired by you can tell that they just sound like that because that's how they sound."

A: "We never sat down and made any decisions or saw some great show and went 'we wanna sound like that'. There was none of that. It was all pretty innocent really."

I reckon that's where the innocence ends with Love of diagrams. They're deftly aware of their abilities and aside from their not wanting to spoil their own destiny, they realize that through hard work and nervousness they've come up with a sound and an approach to songwriting that makes sense, the results are found in their debut 'The target is you', out now on Unstable Ape.

Joel Silbersher

slips in and out of the flickering light of the underground more times these days than a moth without wings, which is actually less than just a little isn't it. Anyway, Silbersher is a mainstay; a singer and songwriter of adequate proportion who's been winking and sweating and dropping pick-up lines on punters since the late Eighties as a prepubescent without ID.

Now he's a soulful gent who appears to burst with ideas and an endless stream of new songs, periodically at least. He's managed to become, and remain a seminal musical figure in Melbourne. His record 'Greasy lens' is the latest collection of his tunes to receive an airing, released on Mick Turner(the Dirty Three)'s record label King Crab some months back. He's also 'done time' working with Barry Stockley, Charlie Marshall in Tendrils, tours with Tex Perkins, spent a number of years in Hoss and also in God. It was in God where things 'began'; Silbersher, a boy from the 'burbs playing pristinely dirty rock music well before the days when he was old enough to use his creativity to come up with gems like 'My pal' and 'Chocka block man', or so my friends tell me.

Steve: "A friend told me about a story that he heard when he was at school about your being at Eltham College(school outside of Melbourne), and that you apparently got suspended for lifting a girls dress up with a ruler. Wanna shed any light on little Joely Silbersher and his deft ruler hand?

Joel: "Don't remember any 'ruler incident', though I admit that the contents of girls dresses was at that time, much on my barely teenaged mind, as was the concept of myself as 'ruler' of the world (including the inhabitants of aforementioned dresses).

Steve: You've been in bands and writing music for years and years now, but in your 'formative years' what was utterly inspirational for you?

Joel: Jeez...'Don't fear the reaper', 'Surrender'(Cheap Trick), 'More than a feeling' (Boston), 'S.O.S'(ABBA), 'Devilgate drive', 'Jumping Jack Flash', 'Sugar, Sugar', 'Daytripper', 'Sexbomb'...I mean, how young a lad are we talking about? And how long have you got? I got excited about all manner of horrible shit like 'Saturday Night Fever' and the first Violent Femmes album, which I recently heard again while trying to keep my food down at The Empress, and now believe it to be one of the most intensely awful, wussy records ever made by anyone, anywhere, particularly the singing and lyrics. I remember loving rock'n'roll music as early as I remember anything else in life. Listened to a lot of radio. Watched a lot of 'Countdown' and 'Sounds Unlimited'. Once I hit my teens, or whatever twelve is, Melbourne folk like Steven Walker and Trevor Block (3RRR-FM) and David Laing (3PBS-FM) and Warwick Brown and John Nolan (Greville Records) were very influential on me as far as putting me on to classic stuff, as was the American magazine 'Forced Exposure'. Typical as it is to say, the whole anyone-can-do-it punk ethos was very important to me feeling confident enough to play music with and in front of other humanoids. Early '80's American Punk stuff was a big deal to me in my early teens, Black Flag, Germs, Flesheaters etc. As soon as I could make two finger chords, with the fifth, not ever bar-chords, I was in a band. AC/DC more than any other band has probably informed my music from back then 'til now. I will never get over them. Also, I despise Jim Morrison and his preposterous ilk. Dunno why, but that seems important. While were dwelling on the negative ('A favourite pastime' Silbersher reports) I'll say that a lot of music-ers my age claim that their music was shaped by a love of bands that I don't give a shit about like The Pixies, The Smiths and The Cure. If this is true then no wonder I feel so magnificently alone (sigh).

Steve: Changing the subject a little, you -to my knowledge- in all these years of writing music have not recorded a solo record per se until 'Greasy lens', why is that?

Joel: I was mean and no-one would come out and play with me, so I took my bat and ball and...'

Joel Silbersher

Steve: So had you ever toyed around with the idea of being 'Joel Silbersher', artist by name and even moreso by reputation before 'Greasy lens'?

Joel: I would have done another Tendrils thing after 'Soaking Red' but Charlie Owen wasnae(that's Scottish I think-Steve) in the mood. I started blurting these fragments that didn't sound like Tendrils or Hoss and once a few started sounding 'songy' and developing a uniquely Joely vibe I decided that it was something to make official, and concentrate hard on. Hard on...where was I?

Steve: Focus Joel focus. Now I'm guessing that means that these songs are kind of old. Did working towards the ultimate aim of a solo record go through fazes stylistically?

Joel: It gradually, very gradually, took shape. I can chip away at a rock for years. Not the way to 'keep abreast of the times'! I could only begin to imagine a whole during the last month or so of recording. The oldest thing on the album is five years old. I won't tell you what it is. Most of it was done in the 18 months before it was released but some of it stretches way back to when 'Soaking Red' and Hoss' 'Do You Leave Here Often?' were being finished off. The amount of guest players on 'Greasy lens' has nothing to do with how long it took. It's all my fault. My peaks and troughs and slacknesses and tightnesses y'know? One minute you think you've had a nice one-night stand and the next you've been someone's pet monkey for several years!

Steve: Of the record, 'I miss your big white bum' is the only song you didn't write, how did you stumble upon in?

Joel: I discovered it when it was pitched to me by the Machiavellian Murray Paterson in a pub one night. Murray is the Ranga (Briswegian for 'redhead') who plays with me, Charlie(Owen) and Skritch in Tex Perkins' band(the Dark Horses). Murray is like the old blues songwriter guy Willie Dixon(lots of hits for Wolf and Muddy) and will try and sell you a song whenever he sees you if you are lucky. I can think of several struggling Aussie 'heartland troubadours' who would do well to procure his poetic services.

Steve: OK, so in it's earliest form what drew you to the song? It's a brilliant song.

Joel: Murray spoke the third verse to me which is "Am I condemned to live this hell? To watch your hips swing like a bell. Ringing for somebody else.. I miss your big, white bum", and I just thought it was so sad and funny. Lucky it has a good tune too but I didn't know that then, I just said "I'll do that". The girl who had just ditched me heard it and said "I keep thinking it's about me" and I said "Firstly, I didn't even write it, and anyway you aren't the only big, white bum in town". Me and Mo are doing an album of that kind of stuff called 'Milk, Milk, Lemonade'. Anyone wanna put it out?

Steve: You're quite the businessman Joel, do you sell cars too? 'Greasy lens' was released on Mick Turner's label King Crab. How long have you known Mick and how long ago did he express his interest in this record?

Joel: Mick Turner knows I do this stuff regardless of whether it has a home to go to or not so I was probably an easy choice. I've known Mick for years. His band Venom P Stinger were really good to my band God when we started up. Mick is one of my favourite creatures and I've loved his music forever as well. We have played a bit together. I was in the Marlan Rosa band a few years ago with he and Jessica Billey, but mainly we just get together and act like idiots and as we grow old we have more of a gut to bust. One day our reggae outfit 'The Freedom Jabbers' will release our album and the World will quiver with hideous pleasure.

Steve: In an effort to keep all your long-lost friends up to date, what's going on of late in the big, bad world of young Joel?

Joel: Everything is pretty good. My imagination is running wild at present and I remember my dreams quite vividly(don't smoke much anymore). For example, the other night I dreamt that I was in a school hallway..and having a can't-find-the-toilet emergency and I produced this little grey turd and was embarrassed so I paid a small boy to put the turd in his pants and say that he did it. Another dream I had was that I was stripped to the waist in this ring, covered with blood and filth and it was like that Van Damme movie 'Bloodsport' - one on one, no rules, battle to the death, all that. I was taking all comers and doing very well. I was fighting, one after another, pretty much the whole roster of young bands on I think the Australian EMI label, and dispatching everyone with brutal efficiency until that big bass player from The Living End burst into the arena with Craig, who used to be in Dan Brodie's band and they sat on me. On my stomach and chest. I can't breathe. I know I'm dyin'. Then I woke up...drenched.

Steve: Nice.. what else?

Joel: What else is going on? Started a new Hoss record the other day. Sounding really powerful and straightforward. Also have been recording stuff for the follow up to 'Greasy Lens'. So far (its) sweet and droney. There's 'Milk, Milk...' with Murray and Skritch. The new Tex Perkins & the Dark Horses album that I am all over.. Couple of videos getting made cheaply for the 'Greasy Lens' stuff.. maybe more Tendrils(I would love that). Chasing women. Running away from women. Whining about not having any money. Reading books, watching movies.. Get drunk, fall down, get up...have weird dreams. Repeat application if necessary. I'm pretty busy and happy actually."

For all the vaguely lucid stories in his songs, Joel Silbersher is, at least in persona, a character, and a pretty funny fella. An album of revisited post-dope smoking dreams could well set his career alight, or then if could be the early morning airing of the cheap videos he talks of for some tunes from 'Greasy lens'. Hell, it could be the hip-hop record he has floating around. But for now, find pleasure in the wonderful comfy-chair essences of 'Greasy lens', available via King Crab.

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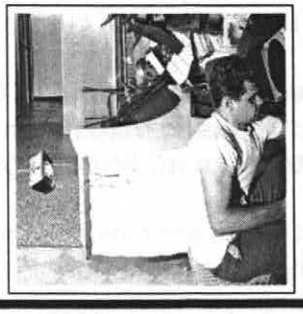

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Town and Country

..deconstructed and rural in minimal kind of way..

(Steve Phillips negotiates the willows with Town and country's Josh Abrams and Jim Dorling in the wake of their slumberous and sumptuous new album '5'.)

SP: Is there a manifesto or a basic framework for what Town and Country produce?

JA: No manifesto, a few guiding principles. We work with all acoustic instruments, and we aim to record the sound of the four of us(Josh:string bass and hand bells, Jim: bass clarinet, glass and Harmonium, Liz Payne: viola, hand bells, Celeste, and Ben Vida: cornet, guitar and Harmonium) playing in a room. Almost no overdubbing.. Within that framework we try to push up against what might be traditionally thought of as 'acoustic music'.

JD: ..The music is a product of these four 'voices', and it's tunes not improv's, pieces, or recordings.

Do Town and Country embrace spontaneity in the recordings, or is the end product the result of working on it until the take it done right all the way through?

JA: We hone the pieces until they are finished outside of the studio, usually in Liz or Jim's living rooms. These days when we record we go for complete takes or at least complete sections. Within that there are always a few surprises which is good, but it is not improv either.

JD: The recordings are important, but they do not represent the conclusive or authoritative versions of the songs, they are just snapshots of tunes at a certain level of development, hopefully one that is interesting enough for repeated listening. We don't always play the tunes all the way through but break them up, because it's a studio and that is possible.

The new album is beautiful. Tell me how long it took to work these songs into the form that we hear them now on '5'.

JA: Thanks. Almost a year..

JD: ..We recorded in April 2003. We first started messing around with ideas in June 2002 (and) songs began to emerge Oct 2002.

JA: They go through many changes throughout the rehearsal process, sometimes even after they are recorded.

'Shirtless' reminds me a lot of Glenn Branca's guitar symphonies, are Town and Country fans of drones and minimalist composition?

JD: Yeah, big fans of Conrad, Riley, Bryars, Russell, Dreyblatt, Reich..

JA: Definitely, though I've heard of those (Branca)symphonies but never had the pleasure.. Originally we were focused on making very minimal music, only adding a change when it was absolutely necessary. Eventually things became more distilled. In some ways this record has returned to the feeling of the first record, but we are playing much better as a band.

'5' has it's soul in tone and a very organic sensibility but the result of your work is that some of the songs almost take on an electronic-type air. Despite your obvious interest in acoustic instruments would Town and Country even consider embracing technologies, samples etc as an addition to your musical artillery?

JA: No, because there is so much to explore it gives the band a good focus. That said we all are fans of so much electronic music and in other situations work with it as individuals. It is a good challenge to explore how some of those ideas translate back and forth. Ultimately it all perceived as acoustic phenomena; sound in space, even if it is produced by computers and speakers. There is a certain humor that rubbing a glass with water in almost sounds like a sine tone.. I think the music goes well with electronic bands live.

JD: The *electronic* sound is deliberate and so is doing it all acoustically. That is Town and Country. Were we to abandon this paradox (I think) the tension would be lost and we'd be lost in the deluge of lap-top-ism.

It seems obvious to suggest that Town and Country's recorded work liberally lends itself to the likelihood of being usable in film. Have you ever recorded music for film or to accompany specific images, theatre etc?

JA: No, but some of the pieces for the first record ('Boxmedia') began as music for a performance project by Lee Anne Schmitt that I worked on with Ben. Some other folks have used our music in their films as well.

Live I imagine Town and Country have the chance to take things a lot further, is this the basic premise for playing live?

JA: Yeah, live the compositions are set and yet they always change depending on the room (or) circumstance. Some of the new music should lend itself to being real stretched out.

JD: As I said the recordings are not authoritative, the songs continue to develop. We don't have to *cover* the album versions in concert because we know the tunes.

The '*tunes*' of Town and country's *5* album are certainly not in keeping with the common premise of the term, yet they contain all the beauty and colour needed to hold their own which sends them spiraling above the realm of being simply musical constructions.

Languid and atmospheric, *5* is a wonderful collection of sounds begging to be discovered, but utterly genuine and subtle.

The album is available now via Thrill Jockey Records: www.thrilljockey.com

Múm::

Poignant Icelandic warblers Múmwere one of a large contingency of visiting international bands in recent months, and probably one of the most universally enjoyed it seems. The band traveled down after a tour of the US where they played to equally embracing audiences, a point which is impressive given that they've been touring on the back of their second album 'Finally we are no one' for nigh on 12 months now.

I was fortunate to hook up with Orvar from Múm, someone with a clear vision and insight into their amazing musical craft, at a time when the band are making a tentative transition onwards to brand new material.

Steve: "Is what you're playing at this time stylistically similar to the last record or is it another step onward?

Orvar: Oh it's definitely similar and a step ofcourse, that's what we're always trying to do. I don't wanna say anything as we still have to record it. I don't wanna make up ideas that we have. I'd say it's maybe a bit lower and slower.. We don't actually wanna make it 'lower and slower' 'cause if that's what comes out that's what comes out.

Steve: You are playing on the back of the last record but I guess it's exciting to be playing new material.

Orvar: Well yeah. Also what we wanted to do was to have a looser schedule. We wanted to do just exactly what we wanted to do. It's so fun to play new songs. Everyone who's been in a band knows that it's most fun to play new songs.

Steve: How long have particular songs stayed in your live shows? Is there a point you get to where you just find there's all this new stuff creeping in that is so much more exciting? Is it like a 6 month thing, a 12 month thing?

Orvar: 'Cause we do everything in bursts really. Like last Summer we were still playing songs that we have played ever since we started. We were playing the same songs that we were playing ever since we started. This time around we're not playing any of those songs.

::Múm::

We're still playing a few songs from our last album and like one really old one but things we haven't played live that much here we played last Summer.

Steve: How long since you've been home? Orvar: I don't know really what I consider home anymore anyway. I've been away from my place, my flat in Berlin now since May. We went to Iceland for like recording and went back to this lighthouse place where we did the last record, that's kind of home as well. The whole band we had the flat together in Copenhagen, that we were renting. We were losing the apartment and we had all our equipment there and everything and we were going to try to find another apartment in Copenhagen. The girls were going back to school in Iceland, that was the thing, and it was Autumn. Like all of a sudden we had no apartment and all this equipment in Copenhagen, so we talked to some people in Berlin and they said "this is such a good town to come and do these things. We can get you an apartment". In no time we packed everything up in a rental car and drove down and we got an apartment like the day after, and just had a really good time. Then we had to go back to Iceland to do a lot of work, then I decided I wanted to go back.

Steve: So in one sense you're still based out of Iceland but you're living in Europe.

Orvar: Yeah exactly. Well a lot of the people we work with are in Iceland and the environment, Iceland is really easy for us. You know everyone..

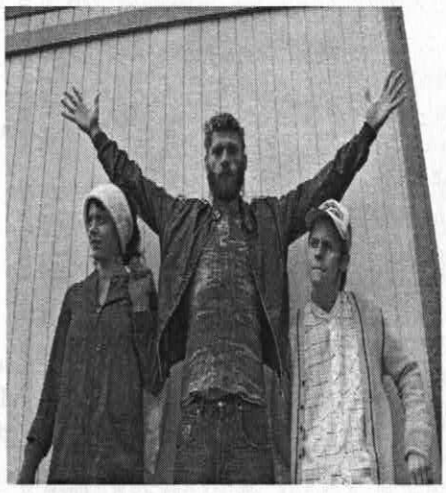
Steve: The last 5 years or so there's been an enormous focus on Icelandic artists, so you think that's been a sincerely positive thing for the profile of Icelandic musicians?

Orvar: Well yeah, for the musicians it's been great. There's so many bands, all kinds of bands now have the chance to go and play. You could get these gigs in Europe but these bands actually go now and tour America.

::Múm

The thing is the perception seems to be people don't really get the full Icelandic music scene. People want to hear this serene, peaceful thing and that's what they get out of. So these three bands that people usually mention(Bjork, Sigur Ros and Múm), they aren't what the Icelandic music scene sounds like but still that isn't stopping all these crazy art-rock bands, hardcore bands and rap bands. It definitely isn't hurting anyone in that way. But there is one thing that is going on in Iceland which is really weird, it's like so many politicians and business people are waking up to the idea that this is like somehow profitable and marketable and that's when you get all the crazy people with and all the weirdest ideas. Well that's really a sad part of it though. At this point there's some strange things happening like the Minister of Industry are setting a committee about the support of Icelandic music. Iceland Air have set up a fund with the city where bands can get a grant if they promise to be advertising Iceland..

Steve: Ambassadors?

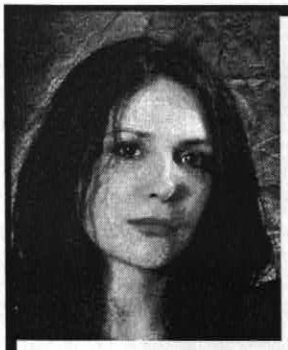


Orvar: Yeah.. I definitely think that's not good for music, and I actually know that Icelandic musicians they won't get into it. But it can be dangerous if they're gonna go out and represent Iceland. I think they should just represent their own music.

:::::Múm:::::

Steve: Does it appear to you in some ways then that people feel Icelandic music is a novelty?
Orvar: "It can seem like that sometimes, but I actually think there is so much good music coming out of Iceland that it's not gonna be like that. I hope this actually permanently opens the door for bands like leaving Iceland.
Steve: Is it interesting to be able to record in a different environment every time?
Orvar: Yeah. We do a lot of things out of enjoyment and experience. We don't approach it like a job and we like to have a perfect job place, an office or anything. We want to go to the lighthouse to record because it's beautiful, we wanna go and have a house and just stay in it for 2 months 'cause that's gonna be an experience as well."
For all good reason, 'an experience' is one of the simple yet superfluous terms that gets strung about when Múm are the focus of talk. Their slight melodies, brittle electronic crust and fragile emotions shiver through the air and at the same time envelope the listener. They are not simply a band from Iceland, they are an international treasure.

Múm's 'Finally we are no one' is available via Fat-Cat.



Handsome Family

Rennie Sparks; the lyricist and auto-harp/banjo playin' half of husband-and-wife songcrafters The Handsome Family, gets all mystical with Sophie Best.

(Sophie:) "How far does your creative relationship with Brett go back - as far as your marriage? (Rennie:) When we got married, we didn't collaborate at all. Brett was writing music, and I was writing stories, and we kept to ourselves. After five years, he asked me to play bass in his band -- it was just something I did for fun for a while, then I started helping him with lyrics. Neither one of us can explain what we come up with together, and I like it that way. I don't want to know what our songs are about, I just want to know that it's something important. We go for months when we're together all the time and the only time we have apart is when one of us go to the bathroom. It gets pretty intense, but it's nice to spend all your time with someone you care about. Besides being in love and being married, now we have this whole world we create together. It makes for a strong bond.

How did you two meet? We met in New York, when I was an undergraduate and he was in graduate class. He was waiting for a date -- I had a bottle of tequila, and he took me and the tequila over his date. She turned up eventually, but it was too late -- she didn't have any tequila with her. I don't know why she thought she would have a chance with him(laughs)..

Where did you grow up? I grew up in New York, on the beaches in Long Island, on the Atlantic Ocean. It was very beautiful, but also very sad. All the towns have Indian names, but the Indians are all gone -- killed by smallpox, and other diseases. Where I grew up was called Little Africa, and I was told that it was because the beach was shaped like Africa. Then I saw a map of Africa, and it didn't look like Africa at all. I learned it was because that was where they brought all the slave ships. I always felt like there were a lot of angry, unhappy ghosts everywhere, and no-one else could hear them. I wasn't the happiest child! My family were Jewish atheists - 'rationalists' they'd call themselves, but really they're just anti-everything. They're like robots - my father, when hungry, will say "I need something for the mouth". They're completely disconnected from themselves. Their punishment was that they had this child who was only interested in the invisible.

When did you first become aware that you saw the world differently? I think I've always been that way. My earliest memories are of flying - slipping in and out of my body, rising up into the air. I remember aerial visions of our house, and other things flying around me. I never thought that was strange. I used to talk to my dog, and she talked back to me - it was only when I was about ten years old that I thought, 'that can't be real'. It comes from having no friends - I was alone with my dog. I was perfectly happy -- it was only when I was with humans that things got complicated. **Is that part of why you started writing?** Writing is one thing, but publishing and disseminating things to the public is another thing altogether. I do it not so much for glory or fame, but because I want to communicate with other people. It's a way of describing things that don't have words - that's really my goal, painting pictures of invisible things and hoping that other people will recognize them. They're just words that make pictures in your head. That's what I like about those old folk songs and murder ballads - ruby red lips, snow white breasts - they conjure up pictures in your mind that you can turn over for hours - ruby red lips! - and they just get more mysterious. They're like pictograms - symbols and signifiers, like dreams. You know, when you dream that you kill somebody, it's not that you want to be a murderer, it's a symbol of other things.

When did you start getting into the old songs, folk balladry? Sometime in the late '80's. Brett and I started going backwards in time -- listening back past '70's country, to classic country from the '40's and '50's, back to the Carter Family, and then going back to find sheet music from medieval ballads. Just to read those old songs, it's like a time machine - you can feel like what it was like to be alive back then.

Why do you think those songs continue to draw people in? People have a longing for history and a connection to the past. Everything's so disposable and new - it's a longing for something that's missing. A lot of old folk songs are nature worship - that's what we miss most, being connected to the natural world. If you can't walk up into the blooming heather, at least you can sing about it.

You're about to go back to England, is your following there stronger than in the U.S.? Yes, I feel like people don't seem to find us strange there, whereas in America, we're kind of marginalized as these weird people skulking under the radar of popular music. The record buying public there is a little bit older; people still buy records in their 50's. In America, once you turn 25, you're supposed to give up that childish nonsense and settle down. There's also this whole dark, gothic young set that seems to like us, which is nice. Sometimes you're onstage in a concert hall, and you look out and see a 50-something man, sitting next to this little boy with black lipstick. **What do you think are the cultural differences between England and America?** In England, people are obsessed with the dark side of American culture. Americans are so obsessed with being positive. We're all supposed to be cheerful here -- it's very emotionally immature. People are afraid to listen to anything but the happiest, poppiest music. I'm fascinated by what Disney does to those fairytales which are actually very dark and scary, like *The Little Mermaid*. She loves this prince, and gives up everything for him and he doesn't love her, and she disappears back into the sea foam. It has all these strange things it teaches you about selflessness, the ability to love people who don't love you - but in America, they're just like (adopts petulant teenage girl voice) "I want the prince to love me!".

What makes you continue to want to create music? The sad state of affairs here in America. It's so false - the news on TV, so many lies. People are so unhappy and isolated. Art is something that can help comfort people, make them feel there's more meaning in their lives, fill up the vacuum they try to sell us of 'good American life'. Everything you buy is disposable, and art itself is thought of as good only when it makes money. But money isn't anything to do with art. We have all these 'personalities' in the music business - it's all obsessed with youth and sexiness, but there's only so many songs you need on those topics. What do you want to listen to on your deathbed? That's when you really do need a song, and there's not a lot on the Top 40 that will help you out.

Tell us about where you and Brett live, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It's a desert, but it's the high desert, so we have pine trees and cactus. The best thing about living up here is that the air's really thin, and the sunsets take a long time to go, because it's such a big sky. It's the kind of place where you can have all sorts of crazy notions. A lot of people have seen UFOs out here -- a lot of people believe in Big Foot, there are lots of strange cults up in the mountains. You're free to be as eccentric as you want. Everything has a golden tinge to it -- the light here always makes me feel like I'm dreaming. All the plants and animals have spines and poison twills, they've mutated into these strange creatures. Up in the mountains, there are mountain lions and scorpions in the desert, a lot of things that can kill you. **How does it compare to Chicago?** Chicago was a great place to meet a lot of musicians, and to try to figure out if I could be a musician, but there's no blue to the sky in Chicago. You don't have a sense of anything but the man-made world. In Chicago, I was always creating forests in my head; out here I think of the sea - the desert looks like the ocean. In Chicago, I felt like I was writing about snow and darkness and tall buildings and trains. Now the words are about invisible worlds -- gold and light and trees. It's like a new chapter for us. It feels different. I feel more serene here, a lot less desperate too."

'SINGING BONES' BY THE HANDSOME FAMILY IS OUT NOW ON CARROT TOP RECORDS.

-Sensory Projects-
casual collection mid-end 2003

Disaster Plan 'Live at the Self help seminar'
14 tracks recorded live at Melbourne's Rob Roy Hotel. Almost a 'best of' selection from the first 5 Disaster Plan LP's, showing their undeniable talent in song.

Damien Jurado 'Where shall you take me?'
Soulful alt-country from a man who is the toast of songwriters the World wide. '..ten songs of dark and disturbing genius..' UNCUT

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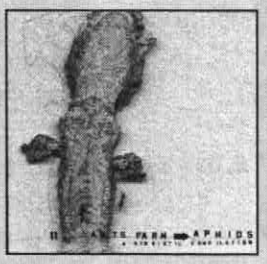
An astounding work of beauty, combines blood sweat and tears with a lush earthen essence and the result is exquisite.



Symbiotic collective's 'Ants farm aphids' compilation
Prized abstract hip-hop compilation from Melbourne's own Symbiotic collective which features members of Curse Ov Dialect, TZU and Music Vs. Physics.

Hood 'Singles compiled'
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Hood 'Compilations 1995-2002'
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-coming up in 2004-
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www.cavaliermusic.com/sensory-projects
sensory@alphalink.com.au

reviews

Califone - 'Quicksand / Cradlesnakes' (Thrill Jockey)
The duo Califone have produced what will very likely be THE sleeper album of 2003. 'Quicksand / Cradlesnakes' is indeed a dark-horse; buried melodies, abstractures and countrified blues arrangements, lacquered with nuance and the occasional rhythmic burst. Tunes like 'Your golden ass' and 'horoscopic. amputation.honey' recall the style of Belgian heroes dEUS, and 'Vampiring again' to a lesser degree cites the sweetness of Wilco. But it's the nonchalance of Califone that airs their intent. Their rumbling rhythms and humble cut-up exercises make 'Quicksand / Cradlesnakes' all-in-all very endearing.
Meandering and complex at times, simple and rustic throughout, 'Quicksand / Cradlesnakes' works via its venerable casuality.

Sun - Sun Remixes (Preservation)
Last year's debut album by Sydney duo Sun was a hit with many, but they've taken the liberty of indulgin' us all over again, track-by-track, with a collection of remixes.
Mapstation and Norbert Moslang provide glacial reinterpretations; nothing fancy, nothing tricky, but structurally altogether different.
Hrvatski and Pluramon add some crust and pitch to 'Sleepin' and 'Reach for the sky' respectively with impressive results from two long-term leftfieldists.
The highlights amongst the 8 lamplights here are certainly the melancholic Pimmon remix of 'Leave it on its own' and Tom Recchion's 'Moon', both of which bob and weave -completely in 'fixed' motion- with delightfully sweet results.
Just as languid as the originals, the tracks on Sun Remixes seldom gallop, despite Sun's strong pop underbelly.

Alasdair Roberts - 'Farewell sorrow' (Drag City)
Just to set the record straight, Alasdair Roberts IS the main man in Scottish folk exponents Appendix Out and despite appearances, 'Farewell sorrow' IS an Appendix Out record. At least the second coming of which. To readdress that, Appendix Out are now Alasdair Roberts, but they remain as folkie and relevant as ever.
'Farewell sorrow' follows up Appendix Out's blissful 'The night is advancing'; a plethora of elegant, traditionally evocative tunes exuding words like blood and lyrics as medieval poetry. The same translates on 'Farewell sorrow'; that the whole of it's parts is an unabashed folk explosion in seemingly micronic detail. The sound, the songs, the sentiment, it's all Celtic and kinda twisted, and only contemporary because of it's era(2003).
Where he lumbered and cracked and stuttered nervously before, Roberts is here in fine voice, oft-uplifted and golden. Weaving the beauty of simplistic instrumentation through the character of Roberts' own highland recollections and tempered with bare-boned percussion's and piano lines, 'Farewell sorrow' is something of a refuge from the solemn odes which sprang forth on previous Appendix Out albums, and a sign that the butterfly has found its wings.

'Young Adam' s/t ('Lead us not into temptation') - David Byrne (Thrill Jockey)
As well conceived and executed as Michael Andrews' Donnie Darko soundtrack, 'Lead us not..' is a wealth of textural instrumentals courtesy of former Talking Heads frontman David Byrne, with help from some of Glasgow's finest indie-rock types. But fans of Mogwai, Delgados or Arab Strap best beware, this is strictly humbling music which lingers in the nether areas of a night on the Guinness: ie. as smooth and intoxicating as they come.

'Indietronica' - various artists (Sonar Music)
'Indietronica' is a cavalcade of the subtle. Awash with near melancholy, set apart by some husky beats, cloaked-up vocoded lyrics and clever tidal electronics wading in and seeping into a beautiful 28 degree landscape. Featuring a number of ah-hem 'geniuses' in their musical field, 'Indietronica' is appropriately sub-titled 'pop and electronica'. Put together by Barcelona's Sonar Music(who also host the annual Sonar Music festival), 'Indietronica' is a completely splendid snapshot of the past three years of the burgeoning indie-electro scene which has formed in major cities in Europe, America and the UK. The tracks are each beautifully crafted exhibitions of the narrowing of the rock vs. electronic divide and are taken from bedroom noodlers to duos to ever-changing line-ups.
Highlights are plenty here, but Dntel's 'Why I'm so unhappy' is exquisite; a lush, emotive collaboration between Dntel, Rachel Haden (That Dog) and Brian McMahan (The For Carnation), this track is utterly mesmerizing and recalls the sublime, crackling beats of Thomas Weber's Kammerflimmer Kollektief release
'Maander'. Its warmth is a kind reflection of just about everything on 'Indietronica', and together with additionally moments of blissfully amazing electro-pop from Her Space Holiday, Laub, Mum, Tarwater, the Notwist and SchneiderTM and KPT.Michi.gan covering The Smiths, 'Indietronica' is barely less than essential.

Matmos - 'The Civil War' (Matador)
Possibly the most original concoction of sounds this side of Bjork's forever outstanding *Homogenic, The Civil War* is at once a refreshing new horizon from San Francisco electro-chefs Matmos, who, ever so carefully, clip and paste, taste then spit and then serve their musical wares through a set buzzing with blissfully clever ideas and even more wonderful results.

Reconstruction is for example, very simply electro-acoustic paradise; gradual yet effortlessly vibrant, Matmos and friends saunder their way through subtle clicks and blunted sharps. Their pondering pastoral numbers glow in a haze of acoustics, folk mannerisms and an essence of gold and tawn.

Featuring (and recalling throughout) the everso-underated David Grubbs and his hot-headed urban-countryisms, *The Civil War* oozes senseless beauty, and is essential as a result.

Various artists - 'Motion: Movement in Australian sound' (Preservation)

Embracing what is without any intended cliché 'a rich and diverse community', Sydney label Preservation(Sun, Rand & Holland) have produced 'Motion'; a double CD set alight with 22 pieces of electronically elaborated sound, shimmering with mesmeric tendencies.

A collection that features some exclusive works by names like Prettyboy Crossover, Pimmon, Qua, Oren Ambarchi, plus Mush/Leaf labelite Clue to Kalo, the Glenn Branca-inspired Scott Horscroft, and one of Sue Harding's cheeky dot matrix recordings, 'Motion' is insightful and enlightening.

'Motion' is not so much ambitious as glorious in its capturing of a wonderfully rich place in Australian music history and culture. An ultimately captivating experience throughout.

Spokane - 'Measurement' (Jagjaguwar)

An angelic sense of ambience is stretched out over 'Measurement', the languid vocals of songwriter Rick Alverson and Courtney Bowles lifting the songs up to some rather lofty, introspective heights.

Aided and abetted by Labradford/Aix em Klemm misfit Bobby Donne, Alverson and Bowles take the basic premise of drone-rock and strip it back to a place where, like Low, single notes reverberate around voice and other minimalistic instrumental structures.

Mouse on Mars - 'Glam' (Sonig/ Thrill Jockey)

In its subtlety, 'Glam' by German electronica key-nut speakers Mouse on Mars is one of the more intriguing and intelligent releases from the genre in some time.

Originally written in 1996, 'Glam' -in compositional terms- is what I've always anticipated was lingering desperately below the surface of their otherwise erratic and wrought generations. 'Glam' indicates at the languid beauty which defied attention in their all too often corrupted rhythms and sonic touches. Morphing forms (see 'Rerelease hysteresis') and dark glacial tidings are littered throughout.

'Glam', apparently commissioned for the backdrop of some quote "Hollywood love and drug movie starring Tony Danza and Ali MacGraw"(go figure?) quivers lovingly('Hi court low cut') with its ambient tendencies and internalisms, and 'Hertzchase Nailway' or 'Peel, smooth and hidder' could easily be a part of Stars of the Lid's next drone-toned installment.

Others play with downbeat rhythms and adolescent clicks and cuts which ride the light organic and sliver transparently without the duo's usual trademark schizouts, making 'Glam' rather outstanding as a result.

'Donnie Darko' s/t - Michael Andrews (Everloving)

Like most great composers, Michael Andrews took an underlying emotional presence and added a sense of darkness, inanimation and anxiety when he set about scoring 'Donnie Darko'. The results are stunning, and nothing less than.

One of 2002's most inspired visual works, 'Donnie Darko' was frankly unnerving; paranoiac, disturbing, and delusional. Andrews' compositions as a result only serve to raise the temperature of the film and set aside make for listening which evokes thoughts of Angelo Badalamenti's 'Twin Peaks', Dead Can Dance's mesmerizing 'best of..' and even Kranky label drone-nuts Stars of the Lid's amazing 'The Tired Sounds Of..'.

Classical and ferociously ambient, Andrews' soundtrack is beguiling in its intensity, and absolutely successful, oh, and we haven't even touched on his reworking -with Gary Jules- of the Tears For Fears classic 'Mad World'.. Monumental.

The Handsome Family - 'Singing bones' (Carrot Top)

Like another husband and wife team Johnny and June Carter Cash, Brett and Rennie Sparks make country music so pure, so unadulterated by contemporary forces it shimmers with life and soul, despite it's distinctly Gothic aura.

'Singing bones' -their latest offering as The Handsome Family– captures the couple sounding well, gorgeous, through songs dripping in pain and heartbreak, love, yes love, delivered via music so simple and glamorless that it becomes the antithesis of its self.

Amongst the darkened tones, it's Rennie who provides the lyrics. Her words are poetry; dramatic and scarred, and stripped, a cold barren landscape where this music is the buffer between light, dark, and colour.

The shuffle of '24-hour store' cuts an unnerving, dreamlike scene with lines like 'no one hears the singing bones, and no one sees the crying ghosts. And everyone thinks "I'm alone, all alone"'. Rennie's Gothic tales set the scene for an album straight out of 'Sleepy hollow' or as with 'Far from any road', French cinema. Brett Sparks has a voice as big as George Jones or Richard Buckner, and his baritone is nothing short of powerful, especially on the amazing accapella of 'If the World should end in fire/ice'.

So from where I am, THIS is true country music; raw, earthy, honest music with a take on the modern World which makes one retrace their vision of life, loneliness, and humanity, not always for the better, but always with a new perspective. The Handsome Family go to lengths to bleed out a sound fueled by all the hallmark touches of deep Southern American country and the results are captivating.

Scout Niblett - 'I Am' (Secretly Canadian)

Here we have a sweet little English lass named Emma Niblett, pouting about in the guise of 'Scout' Niblett. She's the toast of one of my favourite music magazines in years, 'Careless talk costs live', and to some degree it's clear why. But 'I Am' feels musically like some great God-almighty ode to The Breeders seminal debut 'Pod'. 'No-ones Wrong', 'Until Death', 'Boy' and 'Drummer Boy' also provoke reference to The Pixies 'Surfer Rosa' sound; alight with a sparse sound, punk-rock in fashion, but 'I Am' is a recording which is both obvious and deceptive. From Niblett's bratty poetry to her touching vocal warmth, the delivery of 'I Am' is erratic although ultimately playful; Scout's punk roots adding an edge of vibrancy to some otherwise indifferent tunes, making for some pretty impressive results, and some less than overwhelming ones.

'I Am' belts on through its simplicity and Scout Niblett's lingering sensuality, making for a record well worth a look over. But for my mind y'r better to look at Cat Power's 'Moonpix' if you want something truly inspiring.

Mojave 3 - 'Spoon and rafter' (4AD)

A tender collection, Mojave 3's 'Spoon and rafter' is a tentative album, even shy, with a beautifully innate sense of something true reverberating throughout.

Guided by Neil Halstead's dulcet melodies and half-whispers, 'Spoon and *rafter'* is as rustic and earthen as an old house, with a belly full of pastoral pop songs filled out with carefully tempered acoustic sounds. The result? Halstead's songs hint at the soaring splendor of his formative years behind the pedals in Slowdive. *Battle of the broken-hearts* and the brilliant restraint of *Starlite #1* evoke the same casual reverie of Mercury Rev and Swell without the anxiety.

One senses that on 'Spoon and rafter' Mojave 3 stepped beyond being just worthy of casual banter and better still, deserved of some serious listening.

Hidden Cameras - 'The smell of our own' (Rough Trade)

Canada's Hidden Cameras have struck me in the most sincere way, not since a week before when I heard My morning jacket's miraculous and majestic 'Sweatbees'.

Awash with stories of gay tussles; sweet homage and frequent pressing of the flesh, 'The smell of our own' is supreme with the most glorious pop songwriting this side of Melbourne's own Disaster Plan; otherwise slanted, tilted gems which glow with simplicity and a certain warmth.

A sort of Galaxie 500 fuzzed-out kind of energy permeates at every turn, and the playfulness and dare I say choral joy is absolutely palpable throughout.

Tracks like 'Golden streams' and 'The man I am with my man' -which book-end the 10-track set- are vivid, timeless and utterly superb. Take a good shake of Belle and Sebastian's carnality and wit and mix it with Simon and Garfunkle's essential purity and you're in the right playing field.

There's also a distinct optimism which crawls through the album, a freedom if you will, aided by some of the most infectious harmonies and lingering lyrics you'll hear this side of (smog).

But it is one song that has well 'captured me'. 'Smells like happiness', a quintessential piece of musical perfection; it denotes and undoes all the great theories of pure songwriting, and it for me is very much the icing on what is one of the most blissfully fabulous pop albums in years.

Adam Green - 'Friend of mine' (Rough Trade)

Adam Green; he's just a sexy young balladeer lounging through lo-fi's exhaustive abacus of possibilities, right? Maybe, but aside from the obvious, Green, wry wit in tow, deadpans it throughout 'Friend of mine'.

With his symphonic balladeer ass one-footing it in Seventies Haight-Ashbury folk, with another in Nineties slacker heaven(think Beck, or June Panic, you choose), Green leads me to nothing but sortedness over his clearly adept but otherwise bewildering lyrical work on this new collection.

Beautifully orchestrated and tonally superb with an exceptionally rich resonance, 'Friend of mine' is otherwise blissfully simplistic. The juxtaposition that results from his otherwise flawless instrumentation is a heightened awareness of Green's sadist side; lyrics abound with playful conceit, all circumveiled by the arrogance of a genius. It and his Woody Allen bent for irony and crooner-cum-Tony Bennett approach to lyrical execution make him the most likely anti-hero with a traveling Jonathan Richmond singles collection Anti-folk folks have to offer. Adam Green may well be a genius, but it's seriously just too soon to say.

Oneida - 'Secret wars' (Jagjaguwar)

The discordant angular throws of NYC outfit Oneida hark back to one of the true exponents of no-wave punk-rock The Contortions. And the sordid sonic attack of Oneida is the tour de force amongst large portions of pondering rhythms and more than occasional noise exertion. 'Secret wars' is (unlike their previous album 'Each one teach one') short and deeply psychedelic, with big Pink Floyd-styled drums and keyboards Rocket Science would proudly exhibit to the hilt.

'Caesar's column' and 'Capt. Bo dignifies the allegations with a response' are succinct pieces of acid-fueled madness –sans order– in fact structure is exactly what keeps Oneida sounding so interesting and they sense this.

'Changes in the city' closes out the album with an air of poignancy (remember, Oneida are from NYC), it with a building ferocity, calculated but seamless. Oneida is music for the corners of a good hard Autumn, where you either dig in for the Winter or shake while the weather's still got a bit in it.

They came from the stars I saw them - 'What are we doing here?' (Lo Recordings)

A genius blend of buried jazz innuendos shaken and stirred and plied in a vortex of manipulations and electronic minimalist pop, how can it be anything but completely nuts? And 'What are we doing here?' is all of that, nuts and all in fact.

Taking inspiration from low budget sci-fi TV and film, indie-pop, post-rock and French pop, David Bowie and Brian Eno, Architecture in Helsinki, Mum, and Stereolab, cosmic Britpoppers The Beta Band, and other shape-shifters, They came from the stars I saw them are not restricted by any parameter including their imaginations it seems, with melodies woven into batty fish-n-chip shop conversations and consciously lyrics abounding, the combination of this and their Lips'n'Fries inspired psychedelia is mad, and brilliant!

The tracks which feature here have been compiled by the Lo Recordings label from a selection of Lo Recordings releases by this U.K. crew. Topped off by the 24 ½ minute closing epic 'The holy mountain', this taste of TCFTSIST is a welcome mat to something of a subtle new horizon in the oblique.

Colleen - 'Everyone alive wants answers' (Leaf)

Parisian femme du jour Cecile Schott has produced a 13 track body of work under the alias Colleen, a set best described as 'absorbing'.

Convening field recordings with weeping electronic melodies, minimalistic folk, loops and some subtle analogue touches, Schott's debut collides the sentimental soul of Sumu Yokota's 'Grinning cat' and the urban heart of Four Tet's mesmeric 'Pause' release of 2001, creating a beautiful collection; tender and warm throughout.

For those who embrace the gentle grace of Mum and the melodic ambience of Fennesz' landmark 'endless summer', Colleen should be fixed in your sights.

The Decemberists - '*Her Majesty..*' (Kill Rock Stars)

Label-heads are our unsung heroes. Example one: Tom Larnach-Jones, he head of Melbourne's Trifekta is invariably responsible for the local renown of names like Sodastream, Art of fighting, Architecture in Helsinki, Minimum Chips, Destroyer and Songs:Ohia and you can immediately see that between thee and his two latest licensing efforts, Via Tania and The Decemberists, this lanky gent understands pop, beit gentile, languid or even iconic.

So, we gather here to talk of the latter of the set, The Decemberists; who are for me at least, a bolt from nowhere, their new release thru Trifekta *Her Majesty..* as pleasing as the unspeakably fine Hidden Cameras record of last month, and Appendix Out's weighty 'The night is advancing' of about two years ago.

Frontman Colin Meloy exerts a most unlikely vocal presence from his no doubt thin, white skinny bod; a folk flecked Celtic styled voice, at times not unlike that of the truly Celtic Scotsman Alasdair Roberts. Meloy's striking vocal and lyrical talent makes for much of the appeal of The Decemberists, although they are best 'found' after a couple of good sit-downs when their epic slanted pop materializes from within the most obvious of their attributes.

Lingering alongside the aforementioned pop exquisiteness of Joel Gibb's Hidden Cameras, Overcoat mares Sparrow, The Shins, Belle and Sebastian, and even long-forgotten Irish balladeers The Waterboys, The Decemberists evoke it all. *The Chimbley Sweep* and *The Soldiering Life* recall too the loose-fit folk of Sodastream before the album trails off into the golden lamp light of *As I Rise*.

An album of monumental expression and tonal presence, pop seldom comes so clever.

I present to you.. '*Her majesty..*'

Tindersticks - 'Waiting for the moon' (Beggars Banquet)

Finally the inevitable. Tindersticks have sauntered back into the back, back into the great mournful vent from which they came. 'Waiting for the moon' is still not 'Curtains'(so dense) or 'Tindersticks'(brooding, bubbling darkness), but it is frankly far more natural in terms of presence and existence than their last studio album 'Simple pleasure' and their last album certified, the soundtrack to Claire Denis' 'Trouble every day'.

Stuart Staples sounds just a little venomous on the strident 'Say goodbye to the city'; with soaring vocal harmonies, some subtle(and not so) string arrangements, acoustics simmering over drummer Al's militaristic snare work, and the ever-familiar trumpet of Mr. Terry Edwards. The track rates as a small miracle, a ring in from the old days of morose tones and slumberous patterns.

'4:48 psychosis' is metronomic and almost hypnotic. Staples adopts that monotone we fans know oh so well; temperate and free-form. It's poetry and energy sublime.

The title track hovers barely audible, with Staples seeming to fumble his way through a sort of know-inglessness. And you find that theme running through Tindersticks at times, almost like a mind so exhausted from though exists only through flicking lights which eventually trail down into a sort of No-mansland.

'Waiting for the moon' is an album of seemingly veiled calamity where reflection and exquisite instrumental forms create a dark aura which shifts through all manner of light and shade. The songs ride high and soar and run low just the same, but never for the sake of doing either. The result is an album of incredibly comfortable means, just what we've been waiting for.

Nina Nastastia - 'Run to ruin' (Touch & Go)

She's a foreboding looking lady is Nina, almost matronly.

And her music too is forever looming, slightly desperate and heavy-set, lumbering with a wealth of somber colours that upon closer inspection are in fact incredibly rich.

Nastastia's feminite vocals also create an ominous presence, but not in the sense that they are heavy, more in that they are organic.

I'd liken 'Run to ruin' to some of the greats like Mazzy Star's 'So tonight that I might see' or The Breeders' majestic 'Pod'. With studio work from Steve Albini, the eight tracks that form 'Run to ruin' make for a slow brew aided by some deliciously dark orchestral instrumentation. The songs though are dominated by the presence of Nastastia's beautiful vocal delivery and lingering lyrics. For fans of Tindersticks, Gastr de Sol and Tram, with a smidgeon of classic French melancholia, 'Run to ruin' is deserved of your immediate attention.

Kelley Stoltz - 'Antique glow' (Raoul Records)

Antique glow is charming stuff. Kelley Stoltz glues together a whole palette of diverse musical styles and breathes out the resulting gems.

In essence Stoltz has produced record, sloppy yes, flawed yes, but clever, in an unconscious sort of way. Just like he dreamed it all and there was no time for overdubs.

There's a distinctly experimental bent to everything here, even an urban poetry if you will, and as we've learnt through experience, you can derive a lot of great stuff from messing around a little. So when Kelley distills the essence of Pavement and runs it through the Magical Mystery Tourbus you can guess how fine the results are.

With all that in his corner, Stoltz has here an album of infinite possibilities and no less than a pop treasure trove of rough diamonds.

Mogwai - 'Happy songs for happy people' (PIAS)

I was all set to talk about how uninspiring this new Mogwai album was.

Contrary to popular belief, I don't just categorically like Mogwai or all the space-rock heroics they throw up to us. We'll, actually I do but I was planning to be clearheaded on this record purely because substance is no simple thing. So that was two weeks ago. Today, I'm marveling at the depth, the character and the emotive power of 'Happy songs for happy people', a record I was ready to pass over.

This may indeed be Mogwai's most accomplished work. It is truly classical music. The soaring dynamics (like those of 'Killing all the flies') which are built on a bed of sonic bliss, the chords and riffs are all cleverly moulded and subtly presented. The lingering electronics in actuality linger in the background, unlike on 'Rock action' where they were far less sublime. Take 5 1/2 minutes out for 'Kids will be skeletons', you'll feel it, and you'll be mesmerized.

By definition, Mogwai are powerful. 'Happy songs for happy people' proves that restraint is a most effective power. Quite simply put, this album exists on a musical level so filled with insight, so intelligent and intricate that it is nothing short of a masterpiece.

The Strugglers - 'The new room' (Tract)

Brice Randall Bickford II has one of the most distinctive voices in modern music. His slanted country songs exist on the same vocal plain as Will Oldham, Neil Young and Jim James: that Kermit-like strain one of *the* strangest by-products of Jim Henson's illustrious career. Still, that aside, Bickford sure has a knack for writing some stirring words. Like Oldham's rickety 'Arise therefore' album, 'The new room' is seething with clean instrumentation and a resolve for honest production. The man's melodies raise the songs from being simply pleasant to vivid and evocative. There is also a nervousness which underpins everything here, or it could just be the quiver in Bickford's eternally high-pitched vocals. Either way it's soothing stuff.

Via Tania - 'Under a different sky' (Chocolate Industries)

Under a different sky is the touted debut from Australian girl-via Chicago Tania Bowers, though calling it her debut may be misleading as she has been a part of our local music culture (on and off) for many years, particularly Sydneyside.

Now after a sojourn to, and a period spent in Chicago, Bowers has really 'arrived' through this brand new record. Aside from input from her very able guests -the likes of Doug McCombs and John Herndon (Tortoise, Pullman), Scott Herren (Prefuse 73), partner and producer Casey Rice, and Howe Gelb, Bowers' intriguing vocal style is the centerpiece of this full-length outing.

With a stylistic approach hitting leftfield r'n'b and urban hip-hop, and not to mention a clear bent to classic smoky jazz, Bowers' vocal work is dark and sensual, sometimes hushed, always husky, often recalling trip-hop dames Martina Topley-Bird, Bjork, and Beth Gibbons. Instrumentally it must be said that 'Under a different sky' is collectively in the form of a Pullman reworking of a Four Tet record; veiled technology, songs sculpted out of a soulful electronica fit with simplistic electro-acoustic structures, again, not unlike Bjork's *Unravel* for example.

The musical intellect of Bowers and Rice is telling here because with their effort, *Under a different sky* trails through the intricacies of sounds on the verge of bearing over Bowers' unique vocal delivery, aiding her songs to simmer yet gravitate to a strike through their subtle melody and variable rhythms.

From *Boltanski* to *In the Deep*, to *Tune* and beyond, *Under a different sky* is a handsome work of humanly stature.

The Kingsbury Manx - 'Aztec discipline' (Overcoat)

Seems The Kingsbury Manx have come full circle after just three albums. The band now split over America's vast geographical terrain apparently took their sweet time on *Aztec discipline*, a leisurely approach enforced by distance and maybe contemplation of their second record, the lovely but otherwise uneventful Let you down. *Aztec discipline* proves once more that what resonated on their self-titled debut was no fluke.

Aztec discipline returns to the same semblance of space and air, The 'Manx's solid harmonic base back glistening all butter smooth with the bands humbling pop tones and tales of desperation shining in the shadows.

Laced with the usual subtle country tenderness, *Aztec discipline* is a refined bunch of tunes which no-one in their right mind will turn away.

Parsley Sound - 'Parsley sounds' (MoWax)

Combining the angelic electronica of Pretty boy Crossover with the rural textures of Hood, UK duo Parsley Sound have compiled some decidedly lo-fi moods on 'Parsley Sounds'. Previously working under the name Slum, Parsley Sound find themselves at a crossroads between subdued pop melodies and languid lo-fi electro. There's also a distinctly psychedelic element throughout 'Parsley Sounds': 'Ocean house' nods(no pun) to Jason Pierce's melodic flotation's and to the vocal healing of The Stone Roses on 'Find the heat'. And the comparisons don't end there. They've rummaged through their early Pink Floyd records to concoct 'Candlemice', which is quite simply an inspiration.

A humbling mix, an unanticipated delight.

Chicks On Speed - '99 cents' (Chicks On Speed/Mute)

Alluring punk-frock, the all-dressed-up-in-paper antics of Chicks On Speed continue!

'99 cents' is trashy, smart, smarmy, punk-rock electro, and Chicks On Speed are going to bet their reputation on just that, and even better, now they're going to get taken seriously. Well maybe.

Well maybe not, we hope not, because for all their frisky-Chick aptitude there's a fistful of tongue-in-yr-cheek lunacy going down, amidst all the social-politicking. On the fun side there's the foreplay of *'We don't play guitars'*; a 'duet' with electrotrash royalty Peaches, who it turns out does play guitars. There's the title track; an electro-pop song about the evils of consumerism. It's retro-active punk-rock recalling John Lydon at his most subtle on PiL's collected works. No one said punk-rock couldn't ear on socialism and Chicks On Speed at least get it right.

As the metamorphosis of rock turns and tumbles, all pent up, bent and getting dirty with nuovo retro-electro, the relevance of Chicks On Speed is more visible than ever. Their generally anthemic 'give-a(cool as)-f*#k' pop attitude lingers on and with the rise of Peaches, Gonzales, Le Tigre and too the likes of Princess Superstar, the Chicks are well placed having not sacrificed sound and remaining feisty, tasty and more than a little hard-nutted. *'99 cents'* is the beginning of a musical storm.

Okkervil River - 'Down the river of golden dreams' (Jagjaguwar/Secretly Canadian)

With its burly tooing and froing, Okkervil River's third album evokes more a 'sea of golden dreams' than simply a trickle. Will Sheff's rollicking vocals lead an ensemble sound filled to bursting point at times by strings, percussion, harmonies, pedal steal, acoustic instruments and even 'the National Brass', on brass(believe it or not..).

And so lovingly, it's the brass that create the veneer of reverie which permeates throughout 'Down the river of golden dreams';

'The war criminal rises and speaks', 'For the enemy' and 'Blanket and crib' are each shadowy, unnerved, but vibrant. Anxiety always plays a sincere part in the magic of Okkervil River; songs rising and rising, graduating to a height where they do nothing but shine in an aura of energy and tension. This album unfortunately tapers off after a succession of emotion-zapping pieces, all crescendic, the bands excessiveness and expression possibly burning out songwriters Sheff and Jonathan Meiburg a little. Still, 'Down the river of golden dreams' is a temple of angst and beauty, pain and euphoria, carefully executed on the whole with certain resolve.

Josh Rouse - '1972' (Ryko)

1972. It's WAY before my time! But this new Josh Rouse album falls right in my prime, so why not critique it?

I'm here, you're here, let's celebrate life, heh!!? That's the vibe of *'1972'* anyway, 'get up!' and 'smile', that kind of thing.

For Rouse, this time around, this approach to song is perfect. Pop fused with soul and jazz smattered throughout fill *'1972'*. *'Slaveship'* and the single *'Love Vibration'*, and as a result they are perfect AM/FM-type hits, with chorus' you remember and a warmth that keeps you coming back for more.

On the other end of the scale there's 'James' and the enticing opener *'1972'*, both as warm as melted butter. Really, with *'1972'* Rouse proves he's up there with Joe Pernice, Damien Jurado, Joel Gibb(The Hidden Cameras) and Richard Buckner for producing memorable songs with quantifiable values in the sense of being lasting. Parallels will no doubt go out to the Beach Boys and maybe some of the pure pop of the AOR of the Americas of the late Seventies, and this is all cool, all fine, because ultimately it goes to suggest the kind of quality which permeates all over '1972'. Obviously a great year for some.

The Pernice Brothers - 'Yours mine and ours' (Ashmont)
Almost annually Joe Pernice produces an album of some description. Here, now, we have his most recent offering, 'Yours mine and ours', and frankly, well, this one may be his best collection in many years. Sure, the tracks don't defy description, in fact they are purely and simply staple Pernice structures and timings, but his songwriting shimmers on this record; Pernice's vocals as comforting as ever, raspy and glorious, sweet and harmonic. And you can take your pick of the bunch here, there's a new favourite song for every new day, beit the nearly psychedelic 'Blinded by the stars' or the boisterous 'Water ban', the lowly 'Judy' and way on up to 'How to live alone', this is a real singles album.
A welcome return to form, The Pernice Brothers' 'Yours mine and ours', along with My Morning Jacket, Damien Jurado, and Hidden Cameras' recent releases, is already destined to be part of the best records of 2003.

Sparrow - self titled (Overcoat)
Jason Zumpano is the key-player here, Sparrow is his baby. He's Canadian, from Vancouver, and his sliver-tipped vocals recall the same pop grandeur of fellow maple-leaf-wearing fellows Sloan, The New Pornographers, and for purity even (now Australian) piano man Ben Folds.
Sparrow is one of those albums which dares cross the divide between what qualifies as AOR and what is distinctly indie-rock; sometimes a dire commercial proposition, but Sparrow is no compromise for chart movement. Zumpano's ear is tuned for warmth, take the swagger of the excellent Shinsish opener 'Mountain on mountain' or the even more memorable 'Fifth time lonesome', you'll quickly get the picture.
And like his label-mates The Kingsbury Manx or Kill Rock Stars newbreeds The Decemberists, there's a taint air of psychedelia at work, albeit swallowed its folk edge glows of such inferences and more. The songs of Sparrow are sculpted through harmony, warmth and effortlessness. *A must.*

SPOD - 'Taste the radness' (Architecture label)
I went in thinking I'd be listening to an indie rock record, instead I found a sort of road accident between NWA (there's even a language sticker!), Ralph magazine, and Gonzales.
SPOD are Sydneyites who have no doubt raided their tiny chest of inspiration to come up with much of the Chilly-inspired 'Taste the radness'; A pisstake on smoking crack, being down, and whipping your manhood under the bonnet of some otherwise devourinous mankiller with a larger-than-life smile on yr face. Still, 'Taste the radness' is a sharp set, taking on the ass-end of TISM and f*$king it for all it's worth.

Curse Ov Dialect - 'Lost in the real sky' (Mush)
The true bastion of Australian hip-hop, Curse Ov Dialect have apparently been sitting on this record for nigh on two years.
Thankfully it doesn't show as 'Lost in the real sky' is a trove of inspired sounds which one could say will not date for quite a long while yet.
Members Vulk Makedonski, Paso Bionic, August 2, Atarungi and Raceless produce a sound so complex that it initially takes some getting used to. But the dense core of Curse is a pleasure to behold once you've worked your way to it. Multi-lingual raps and textured beats, sampled radio broadcasts, football calls and television documentaries develop a sensation of something far deeper than so much of todays hip-hop, both on a cultural and political level. The sampled melodies are ridiculously assured, like 'Baby how'd we ever get this way?', 'Wolf moon' and 'Multicultural markets', the latter seeped in Eastern and Middle Eastern instrumental touches and rhythmic watermarks.
Curse Ov Dialect is the first truly concerted Australian hip-hop outfit outside The Avalances to step confidently forward and present us the challenge of new horizons. My advice, Prepare yourself!

My Morning Jacket - 'It still moves' (ATO/BMG)
Seemingly bought up on a steady diet of Neil Young, Galaxie 500, The Beach Boys, The Beatles, Led Zeppelin and The For Carnation, My Morning Jacket's blend of melancholy -with sky high harmonies and treatments- is at times nothing less than ethereal. Their production, so distinctly earthen, it's a reliance on certain tactical production ingredients aiding their rise from the mediocre to the memorable.
The bands major label debut, 'It still moves' distills the greatest parts of their impeccable 'Sweatbees' EP of earlier in 2003, and redelivers shards of it through the albums 12 new tracks.
Singer/songwriter Jim James is clearly a proven talent('Sweatbees' is a testament to this) and he takes the soul of country and meshes it seamlessly with AOR from America's West Coast. It sounds like a simple formula, I mean Chicago did it, and so did Neil Young in the early Eighties, but it's a delicate balance. 'Golden' for instance is, on the face of it, a hotchpotch of shy musical stylisms, but its tenderness and focus are true, and it's when My Morning Jacket get bold that's when the magic starts to rise up. Like all great songwriters, James can transport the listener, taking the ambience from a whisper to a wail, through a haze of psychedelia-fuelled song to casually euphoric indie-rock.
'It still moves' shares just a few of these moments, but they can be hard to find. Its inner most workings are though somewhat special, yet it does not quite capture the inexplicably glorious shivers of 'Sweatbees" most astonishing tracks, and the gap between brilliance and greatness here is rather wide.

Growing - 'The sky's run into the sea' (Kranky)

I sat down with 'The sky's run into the sea', a few times actually, hoping that its squed ambience might wash over me and make this easy. This just continued not to happen and 'The sky's run into the sea' failed to stick.

Unlike their Kranky labelmates Stars of the Lid or Keith Fullerton Whitman, Growing fill their space with an anxiety which removes the expectant tranquility. Instead, Growing's extended soundscapes are alive with what is a far more menacing presence. Guitar and bass loom, a darkness unnerving ambience lingers. 'Life in D' for example evokes the same flashpoint carnage as any seriously heavy metal outfit might, though it being through great restraint and sonic stagnation. I took the album for a walk a few weeks later through some largely indescript suburban streets with a wallpaper of curbside collections, threatening skies and brick veneer, it was all mildly uninspiring unless I was Howard Arkley. Suddenly Growing became a force, a solid sound, and one of determined substance.

Sound exploration appears as 'The sky's run into the sea' opens out, and through it's grey textures and angular tendencies, the album alludes to something far more alluring, with a deafening air of toxic intent translated through shadows of sound.

Death Cab For Cutie - *'Transatlanticism'* (Barsuk)

Tenderness fills the work here. Ferocity barely marks to work of Death Cab For Cutie, it never really was. Despite their indie-rock fetishes and penchant for guitar layering and chiming rhythms, Death Cab For Cutie and their leader Ben Gibbard continue to linger in the diary pages of young adults, filled with post-teen emotions and itching loins hell-bent -not necessarily on sex- but, love.

And on *'Transatlanticism'*, Gibbard is once more filled with longing and pox-less insights, a little like Jason Pierce and his priceless, essentially smackless 'Broken heart'.

Gibbard's familiar lyrics are sensitive, Death Cab's musical bent reflective and pre-modern. Simplicity is the most ensuing sentiment of the Death Cab arsenal, *'Transatlanticism'*'s pop base plied with resonance and reverb and structure, it still reeks of the simplicity of their ultimate song ideas. And this is the attraction of this band where others pale.

Notable highlights include the album midpoints *'Passenger Seat* 'and the title track, both smooth indie works soldered with reflective lyrical beauty and gentle instrumental expression.

'Transatlanticism' = "the sugary smell of Springtime".

Guided by voices - 'Earthquake glue' (Matador)

Threatening to do what they had apparently most abhorred, Guided by voices became 'sell-outs' three years back when they signed to TVT Records. The funny thing is that as fans continue to mourn their lack of moral fibre, GBV release 'Earthquake glue'; a 15 track set which ironically confirms that their charm and prowess in the indie-pop stakes remains relatively the same.

Well that terrible attempt at kiddie-style tabloid journalism got lost somewhere there: Guided by voices returned to their Motherland record-label Matador one album back already. But what I'm saying is for the most part true, their two TVT releases were viewed in the main by fans as a stab in the back of indie-rock existence and insistence.

'Earthquake glue' is really a return to greatness for GBV. The air of the album is decidedly upbeat and it glows as a result. Bob Pollard saunters his way through a brand new collection of smooth, seamless pop works, and given the disappointing reaction to their last two albums, 'Earthquake glue' is a welcome return to form.

The first four tracks are standouts, no question, and as per usual, Pollard again pulls out the best track titles this side of Godspeed You! Black Emperor with gems like 'I'll replace you with machines', 'Of mites and men' and 'She goes off at night'. Nice one Sir, nice one.

The Essex Green - 'The long goodbye' (Low Transit Industries)

A natural pop record, 'The long goodbye' is beautiful collection of songs that pays serious homage to pop from the ages.

Jeff Baron, Chris Ziter and Sasha Bell create a lush environment for their exceptional songwriting which rings all sorts of bells on the deluge of American girl bands in the Sixties, contemporary indie rock and even Britpop of the early Sixties. Then there's recent touchstones like Belle and Sebastian and the Elephant 6 collective.

The Essex Green have produced one of the surprise releases of 2003; an album of purity and quality which seems unperturbed by the outside World but just as much a part of it. Spirited.

The Shins - 'Chutes too narrow' (Sub Pop)

The Shins' debut 'Oh, inverted World' was one of those records that rose out of an intense period of quality releases, only to permeate well after its unveiling. The band have continued to expand their initial good-will on with 'Chutes too narrow'; an unabashed collection of pop tunes, most gloriously catchy, others a better then simple insight into great songwriting.

The opener 'Kissing the lipless' has the sort of essence that made 'Smells like teen spirit' have such wide appeal. Then there's the slow burn of 'Young pilgrims' and the mod-pop pop of 'Saint Simon' and 'So says I', literally dragging 1963 forty years down the road. That means my parents would probably pass out over The Shins, and thus, this is a great part of their songwriting appeal, breadth and versatility.

A record which owes as much to The Beatles and The Beach Boys as it does Sloan or Jason Faulkner.

Damien Jurado

Symbiotic collective

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